ROMANCE READER #5

2 BOOKS IN ONE! FLIP OVER!

Echoes of Love

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Elaine L. Schulte

Paula Ingraham had a knack for falling in love...with the wrong men.

A BARBOUR BOOK

ECHOES OF LOVE

by

Elaine Schulte

Flip over for another great novel!
SONG
OF JOY

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Westwood, New Jersey

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Through the darkness of sleep, Paula heard ringing. Time to wake up, she thought, though it didn't sound like her raucous alarm clock. Blinking groggily, she leaned across the bed and pressed the clock's alarm button, confused by the strangely familiar peach-colored walls, the Victorian furniture. Of course — she was home. Not in her tiny condo in Phoenix but really home — upstairs in her parents' venerable Spanish house in Southern California.

She peered at her old ivory clock. Eleven-thirty. The morning was nearly gone, but then she hadn't arrived until 2:00 A.M.

Unpleasant memories assailed the edges of her consciousness, and she forced them away, not wanting to remember the heartbreaking details of why she'd run home. It was terrible enough to recall that she'd entrusted a man with her heart and her hopes, and now, because of his lies, she'd have to decide what to do with her life.

Perhaps she could sleep longer, just another fifteen minutes. She was too exhausted to make up her mind about anything yet.

Lying back on the cool pillow, she remembered her parents had mentioned Matt Montgomery last night. How strange that she'd nearly forgotten about him lately. Did they assume he'd help her overcome her heartbreak? Or that she'd go on the Yucatan trip since he was going?

She reset the alarm to ring in fifteen minutes, then rolled over and pulled the light bedsheet over her shoulders, drowsily welcoming the grayness again.

Matt Montgomery . . . She remembered bringing him an armful of roses. Of all the simple-minded things — taking him an armful of roses! But she'd been twenty-one then. It was nearly two years ago when she'd been home from college for spring vacation and Matt was visiting his parents next door. On Saturday morning, she'd impulsively cut roses from the garden for him. She could still visualize him as she drifted off to sleep.

She rang the Montgomerys' front doorbell with wavering courage. At the sound of its melodious chimes inside, she nearly fled, but already firm footsteps approached the door.

Matt opened it, a slow smile spreading across his face. "Well, look who's here — Paula Ingraham!" He wore a pale blue knit shirt and tan slacks, and towered above her in the doorway.

"Hi, Matt," she responded with an awkward catch in her throat. He was even more attractive than she remembered: sun-streaked blond hair, dazzling smile, and deep rift in his chin. How mature he looked now. It wasn't just his broad shoulders and solid stance; it was the determination in his blue eyes.

Nervously she thrust the flowers toward him, shades of red, yellow, pink, and white all jumbled together. "A homecoming present."

He gazed at the bouquet in astonishment. "For *me?*"

Hasn't anyone ever given you flowers?" she inquired as if it were a natural gesture on her part.

His lips turned up with pleasure and a hint of amusement. "Not that I recall. I'd even forgotten how wonderful they smell. Thank you, Paula."

She smiled up at him in the sunshine shimmering through the eucalyptus trees, and it seemed that the two of them were encircled by the fragrance of roses. She was uncertain why she'd brought them; perhaps it was to learn whether he still had the same bittersweet effect on her as when she was a girl.

His eyes darted to her short tennis dress and widened. "I'm certain that I've never received flowers from anyone so beautiful."

She laughed lightly, not believing him. Her figure was slim, and perhaps she was pretty with her honey-blond hair and blue-green eyes, but she was not beautiful. Her smile was her best feature, she supposed, her teeth having been in braces for four long years.

"Would you like to come in?" he asked. "Maybe you can help locate a vase."

She followed him through the familiar hallway to the pale yellow kitchen where years ago she had eaten his mother's freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. This morning, the aromas of coffee and bacon still lingered.

"Mom and Dad are out," Matt explained, placing the roses on the old stainless drainboard.

Heat rushed to her cheeks, and she was thankful his attention was directed toward the kitchen cabinets. She'd known very well that his parents were gone; they'd left before she cut the roses!

"I don't remember where Mom keeps things anymore," he remarked, banging open one cabinet after another in search of a vase.

"Up there, if I remember correctly." Paula pointed to a high cabinet over the kitchen sink. "They're with the big punch bowl we've borrowed for special occasions."

Matt carried over a rickety stepstool. "Seems like I did get vases out

of there for Mom."

As he climbed the first two steps, Paula was aware of the strength in his tan arms; they were covered with blond curly hair. She forced her eyes back to the cabinet.

"The door's stuck." He tugged mightily on the cut-glass knob, and the cabinet door flew open. Below him, the stool jerked, throwing him off balance.

"Oh!" she called out, reaching up to steady him.

The stool crashed down behind him, and Matt fell against her upraised arms. For an instant his arms tightened around her as he caught his balance. The weight of his body against hers and his clean soapy smell made her senses reel. He moved away, taking hold of her shoulders. "I'm sorry! I hope I didn't hurt you."

She shook her head and forced herself away. If only he knew that her fondest wish years ago had been to be in his arms!

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asked.

"Yes, just fine," she replied, although her heart pounded wildly.

He laughed and righted the stool. "Well, let's give it another try."

"I'll hold it," she offered and steadied the stool as he climbed up again.

He located a brass vase. "I hope this will do."

"Yes, it's lovely —"

"You'll have to give me a hand with the roses." His deep voice was calm as if he'd already dismissed their being in each others' arms. "Flower Arranging is one class I never took."

"Nor I," she returned as evenly as possible.

At length they chatted about the neighborhood news, then their own lives as they arranged the roses in the vase. Finally he carried them to the living room and set them down on the oak coffee table. "I can't believe you'll soon graduate from college." Looking at her oddly, he said, "There's a good movie on downtown tonight. Would you like to go?"

She managed a restrained, "Yes, thank you. I'd enjoy that, Matt."

She'd scarcely been able to contain her excitement all day.

When he picked her up in the evening, he already seemed distant. In the darkened theater, she placed her hand on the armrest between them, desperately hoping that he might hold it. Please, Matt, please love me, she thought.

He seemed oblivious to her availability. Once when she reached for their popcorn, she caught him watching her, but he merely smiled and turned away to the movie. He probably still sees me as a child, she thought, and the warm popcorn stuck in her throat. Sadly, the evening did not improve.

At her parents' front door, the porch light turned his face into

shadows and sharply etched planes. "It was good seeing you again after all these years, Paula." His tone rang with finality.

She put on a bright smile. "Yes . . . well, thanks for the movie."

"I'm flying back to Sunnyvale tomorrow night," he said as if to re-emphasize the end of their relationship. Perhaps it was only the light, but his face appeared grim with determination, as though he knew just where he was and where he was going, and there was no room for her in his plan. He made no move toward her, not even to shake her hand.

She unlocked the door quickly. "Thanks again, Matt. See you."

Her smile faded the instant she closed the door. Oh, Matt! her heart cried out, Why is it that I've always loved you so, and you've always seen me as the little girl next door?

When the alarm clock rang again, Paula awoke with a start. She'd been dreaming! She reflected over what a childish dream it had always been, though the roses and their so-called date had been real enough. She had agonized again and again over her stupidity in bringing him roses — and now to have dreamed of it too.

Rumor had it that Matt, once the neighborhood Eagle Scout, had turned into a playboy, dating one beautiful woman after another. As president of an electronics company, he had undoubtedly showered his dates with roses . . . and not of the homegrown variety. Enough about him! she decided, sitting up in bed. Now she needed to find a job and an apartment. And today was the final day to make reservations for the Yucatan trip, *if* she decided to go. She swung her slim legs to the floor and stood up on the thick white carpeting.

Gayle, her dearest friend, would stop by for lunch in half an hour. She'd undoubtedly be as brimful of excitement as was the note she'd typed on her mother's Santa Rosita Travel Agency letterhead three months ago. Paula extracted it from her handbag and read the note again.

It began humorously enough with *Dear Fellow Archeologist, Paula* — humorous because she'd attended only a few archeology seminars with Gayle in college, and they'd dug together at a prehistoric Indian site in New Mexico with Gayle's favorite professor and other archeology buffs.

Great, great news! I've dug out the old Santa Rosita High and City College yearbooks to get a group together for a two-week tour of the Yucatan in February. It's going to be a dream come true! Let's be roommates again!

Your old roomie,
Gayle

P.S. Matt Montgomery has signed up!

Surely Gayle means this as an added enticement, Paula thought when the letter had arrived in Phoenix. But Matt hadn't mattered then! She'd fallen in love with Tony Rilki, owner of the public relations firm where she worked, and he was in the process of getting a divorce so he could marry her. She still hadn't discovered his deceitfulness when she'd replied to Gayle, with a "Thanks, but no thanks, old roomie. Would you believe I'm in love!"

Now that she'd fled Tony, given up her job and Phoenix apartment, and returned to Santa Rosita, Gayle would probably try again to convince her to go on the Yucatan tour. During these last weeks of upheaval, her mother had mentioned the trip on the phone. And now it was only a week away. How life had changed in three months!

She remembered arriving home last night, and her parents happily climbing out of bed to welcome her. "How exhausted you look, Paula." Her trim mother, so lovely with her halo of salt-and-pepper curls, had looked older somehow; her father appeared grayer too. They'd sat sleepily with her at the kitchen table while she sipped steaming hot chocolate, feeling loved and pampered — an only child again.

"I am tired," Paula admitted. "I suppose I shouldn't have tried moving and driving home all in one day."

"After all that you've been through, you should rest this week and then get away," her mother suggested. "You need new surroundings. Gayle said there were still openings on the Yucatan trip when I called to invite her to lunch tomorrow. I hope that's all right, inviting her to lunch."

"It's more than all right. I've missed her too."

Her mother added, "Think about the trip."

"I don't know. At the moment I doubt I'll have the energy to go anywhere except to bed for weeks."

Her father said, "I'll spring for a jungle outfit for pyramid climbing."

Ordinarily she'd grab at the chance to go, but not now.

"Matt Montgomery is going," her father added.

Paula glanced sharply at him, but she saw he'd merely stated a fact. Matt was going. That was all. The last thing she needed was another man, especially someone like Matt. He would only remind her of her knack for falling in love with the wrong men.

Her mother laughed. "It's hard to believe that Matt used to babysit you."

"Yes, I suppose it is," Paula agreed. Their so-called romance had been hopeless from the start. She'd been eight years old, and he'd been fifteen — her babysitter! Her family had just moved to Santa Rosita, and she'd peered warily from behind the living room draperies to see this Matt Montgomery.

The instant he stepped from the front door of his house, she was stunned. He was wonderfully handsome . . . and in high school.

She had answered the door herself.

"Are you Paula?" he inquired.

His deep blue eyes held hers, and finally she nodded. She had never forgotten that moment. Shortly thereafter, she gave up braids and arranged her hair a hundred different ways, trying to attract his attention. She and Gayle ran behind him when he delivered newspapers on his bike.

"What are you kids up to?" he'd call back while he pedaled along. But he didn't seem to care, for he continued to pursue Vanessa Starke, the most gorgeous girl in the high school.

When he left for Stanford University, Paula tried to forget him, but he constantly invaded her daydreams, especially when Vanessa married someone else. After five years of college, Matt remained in Northern California, moving to Sunnyvale. He was so preoccupied with starting and then running a high-tech company that he rarely came home.

The seven years between them always seemed insurmountable. But now she was twenty-three and Matt was thirty. Perhaps he'd see her differently on a trip, she speculated before realizing that she was still daydreaming about him.

As she and her parents headed upstairs last night she'd said, "I think I'd better start job hunting Monday instead of gallivanting around Mayan ruins."

They looked disappointed, and she quickly added, "Can you put up with me at home again until I find an apartment?"

"You're welcome as long as you please," they responded.

Her mother had kissed her cheek, adding, "Isn't it curious that Matt should be staying with his parents next door now? He's househunting in Santa Rosita. He'll be moving back since he's sold his company."

Paula had cast a suspicious glance at her too, but her mother apparently was only sharing an item of neighborhood interest. Fond as they'd been of Matt, her parents had always discouraged her crush on him, pointing out the seven-year difference in their ages.

How odd to have fallen asleep thinking about him last night, then this morning to have dreamed about the roses. For a while, at least, she had forgotten Tony.

She'd have to hurry to shower. As she passed her Victorian chest of drawers, she noticed the framed photograph of herself with Gayle, striding along arm-in-arm in front of Santa Rosita High and smiling as if they owned the sun, the moon, and the stars.

Well, she certainly hadn't felt like that lately, Paula thought, though she wasn't ready to give up on life yet.

Half an hour later, she hurried downstairs in tan slacks topped by a tan-and-white-striped sweater. Inspecting herself in the entry mirror, she was pleased at how refreshed she appeared for the first time in weeks. It's from being home, she thought, from sleeping well at last after the break-up with Tony. Thank goodness I asked Mother to tell Gayle about it.

The smell of warm blueberry muffins lured her to the kitchen, where she found them cooling. A note taped on the refrigerator handle read,

> *Forgot to tell you it's my volunteer day at the hospital. Salad and blueberry muffins for you and Gayle. Ice cream in the freezer if you want dessert.*
>
> *Love, Mother*

Paula found the salad in the refrigerator and took out butter to soften. How like her mother to have invited Gayle for lunch and to have baked muffins this morning. The house was polished up too. The kitchen's Mexican tile floor gleamed, as did the copper pots and pans hanging over the work center. Near the French doors, the round oak table held a basket brimming with red-orange tangelos — undoubtedly part of the backyard tree's usual bumper crop.

Outside, the sun beamed through the overhanging pepper tree and onto the brick patio. She opened the door, and the mild Santa Ana breeze greeted her warmly. Despite it being early February, they could eat lunch on the patio.

Paula heard high heels clicking faintly. Then Gayle hurried around the side of the house, her upswept red curls shining in the sunlight. She looked marvelous as usual, wearing a navy blazer over a kelly green dress.

"Paula . . ." Gayle's elfin face curved into a cautious smile, but her enormous green eyes brimmed with concern. "I thought you'd be back here! You look . . . just fine. I didn't know what to expect . . ."

To Paula's astonishment, her lips began to quiver, and a soft sob escaped her as she rushed into Gayle Oliver's arms.

"Oh, honey," Gayle said, holding her close. "You're home. Everything's going to be all right now. It's really going to be fine. If only you weren't so trusting."

"But you are too!" Paula returned.

"You trusted the wrong person —"

Paula pulled away, her lashes moist. "I know. And, worst of all, Tony always said, 'Trust your friends today as if they'll be your enemies tomorrow.' Why didn't I understand I shouldn't have trusted him?"

"I suppose you didn't want to," Gayle responded. "Still, it's better

to be hurt occasionally than *never* to trust."

"I don't know . . . it's too dangerous to trust!" She was appalled at the hot tears that burst from her eyes, and it took a moment to bring her emotions under control. "It leaves us too vulnerable." She wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry. You're the first person to see me cry about this."

"You must have needed it." Gayle fumbled for a tissue in her handbag. "Oh, how I'd like to give that Tony a good shaking!"

"A good shaking he could use," Paula said. "But *you?*"

Gayle bristled as she handed over a tissue. "At the very least, I'd give him a good talking to!"

"He could use that as well, although I can't imagine what good it'd do." Paula mustered a smile. "I think I'm finished crying."

"You want to talk about it?" Gayle asked quietly.

"Suffice it to say that Tony lied about being in the midst of a divorce. Moreover, he neglected to mention that there'd been a prior marriage and two children in Chicago!"

Gayle shook her head. "I can't believe it!"

"I couldn't either, at first. At any rate, his second wife has money, and he'd never abandon that for me." She shrugged hopelessly. "He loved me in his own way, I suppose. He's the kind of a man who needs the drama of two women in his life. I wasn't his first *other* woman and probably won't be his last."

"At least you didn't waste your entire life on him!" Gayle replied. "Some women do on men like that."

"But I should have known better! He blamed the entire impasse on me for being so darned . . . virginal. I'm still not quite sure why I held out. . . ."

"Thank goodness you did!" Gayle responded with vehemence. "If you hadn't, you'd have that guilt to deal with too . . . and who knows what else! Just give it all up to the Lord, honey."

Paula was in no mood to contemplate that.

"Let's get down to business and eat that lunch your mother promised," Gayle suggested. "You're looking far too thin."

By the time the salad was tossed and they were outside eating, Gayle maneuvered the conversation to the Yucatan trip. "You have to go, Paula," she insisted, spearing a bit of tomato with her fork. "It's the chance of a lifetime! Moreover, I've talked Dr. Zayere into speaking at our pretrip meeting next week."

"How did you pull off that?" Dr. Zayere had conducted the seminars on archeology she'd occasionally attended with Gayle during their last two years at the university. And last June after graduation, he'd headed the archeological dig in New Mexico.

"Things just seemed to fall into place," Gayle said.

"Things always fall into place for you," Paula responded with a

shake of her head. "And I tried to talk you out of minoring in archeology!" As it turned out, Gayle's business-and-archeology background had become quite useful — far more useful than her own degree in journalism.

"Come with us," Gayle pleaded.

"I'll think about it," Paula answered, biting into a warm blueberry muffin.

"Would it help to remind you Matt Montgomery is going?"

Paula glanced toward the Montgomery house, most of which was hidden by eucalyptus trees and a wooden fence covered with bougainvillaea. "That bit of information won't entice me."

"What about our being roommates again?"

"That might," Paula admitted with a smile. "But at the moment I have to find a new job and an apartment."

When they relaxed after lunch, she noted something different about Gayle, an excitement dancing in her green eyes. "What's the secret?" Paula asked.

"I'll tell you tomorrow."

"Why not now?" She was suddenly suspicious. "It's not one of your schemes for my snaring Matt?" She remembered some of their harebrained ideas for getting Matt's attention when they were girls. "I'm most definitely not going to roller skate by his house again!"

Gayle laughed. "It has nothing to do with Matt. Trust me. Tomorrow night. Let's have dinner at my house. By the way, Evan Walker is going on the trip, too, along with some of his friends from the computer company where he works. He's divorced now."

"What happened?" Paula asked. Evan had once taken her to a high school prom and a few movies, but their relationship had never been serious.

"His wife forgot the part of the marriage vows about forsaking all others. The marriage was a disaster."

"Poor Evan," Paula sympathized.

When Gayle left for the travel agency at one-thirty, Paula was too tired to unpack the suitcases in her room. Still, she didn't want to go to bed on such a beautiful day. Perhaps she would lie out in the sun by the neighborhood pool.

She slipped into an old white one-piece bathing suit and grabbed her new paperback novel and dark glasses. After locking up the house, she headed through the backyard toward the pool complex. No one will be around on a February afternoon, she thought as she approached the ivy-covered wall surrounding the pool.

She opened the squeaking redwood gate and started for the sunny side of the pool deck, aware only of the warm breeze rustling the ivy

and the palm trees.

"Paula!" a low male voice called out.

The sound of Matt speaking her name made her catch her breath. She turned and watched him get up from a lounge behind the gate. "Hello, Matt! I didn't dream you'd be here too."

He strode toward her, obviously admiring her trim figure. Her thoughts faltered, then from force of habit she smiled and held her hand out to him.

"You look terrific," he said.

"You too," she answered. There were lines at the corners of his mouth and beneath his blue eyes that she hadn't noticed before.

"Thought I'd get some sun," she said and sat down more quickly than she anticipated on the nearest chaise lounge.

"Doesn't the sun shine in Phoenix nowadays?" he asked amiably, settling on the lounge next to hers.

She laughed. "I haven't had time to find out lately." During the last few weeks in Phoenix, it seemed as if she were living under a dark cloud.

"Working too hard?" he asked.

"I quit my job. I'm moving back to Santa Rosita."

"You too?"

She nodded. "Mom told me that you're househunting — that you've sold your company, but I don't know the details."

"I sold it to a conglomerate."

"Congratulations!"

"Thanks, but it's less than an unqualified success."

"I don't understand."

Matt shrugged. "Despite the conglomerate's promises, I found I was no longer in a position to steer the company."

"Bad attorney?"

He shook his head. "Afraid it was my own fault. I'd pushed myself to the point of exhaustion, to the point of wanting to trust someone else's promises. They'd given in to all of my major demands so I was inclined to be a little too trusting." He sighed with resignation. "Actually it worked out according to my original plan . . . founding a company and selling it in five to seven years."

"I suppose that's what's important," she said. He didn't look especially pleased with the millions he might have made from selling his company. She glanced up and found his blue eyes studying her, no doubt still seeing the little nuisance next door.

The soft breeze ruffled his hair. "I saw Gayle arriving at your house," he said, sitting back on the lounge. "I guess you know the big news."

"Big news?"

"About her and Josh being engaged."

"Gayle and Josh Granville?" She could scarcely believe it, although they'd been dating since last summer. Josh had been Matt's best friend all through school. When Matt had run for class office and student council president, Josh had been his biggest booster; shy as he was, Josh had always managed winning campaigns for Matt.

Matt raised a surprised brow. "She didn't tell you?"

"No, not yet," Paula answered, puzzled, "but she was saving a secret for tomorrow." It would be like Gayle not to mention her wonderful news in the face of someone else's distress.

"I was certain she would have said something," Matt said in dismay. "You two were always best friends."

Paula looked away toward the diving board. "We discussed other things."

"Look, I really am sorry."

"It's okay, Matt," she reassured him. "I'll pretend to be wildly surprised."

"Thanks."

He looked so embarrassed that she cast about for another topic. "I hear that you're going on the Yucatan trip."

"Yes, Josh and I are going to be roommates. Gayle said that she was going to try to talk you into it." He laughed. "You *do* know about that?"

"Yes, that I know."

His blue eyes turned serious. "I hope you're going."

Her heart suddenly beat faster. "Yes," she found herself saying. "Yes, I'm going. I'm . . . looking forward to it."

"Wonderful!" He glanced at his watch and sat up with a start. "I'm late for a meeting," he said, getting to his feet. "Thanks for not telling Gayle that I gave the news away."

"Sure, Matt."

"See you, Paula."

She sat on the chaise in shock. It was surprising enough that Gayle was going to marry Josh Granville, but even more astonishing that she . . . that Paula Marie Ingraham was going to the Yucatan. It would clean out most of her savings, and she hadn't planned . . .

Matt waved to her as he retrieved a tailored white beach jacket from a chaise by the gate.

Still astonished, she could only wave back.

It was a while before she reminded herself that he'd sold his company and that his meeting was probably more pleasure than business . . . and most likely business with a beautiful woman!

2

Paula was unpacking her suitcases and cartons the next morning when Tom Timmons, editor of the biweekly *Santa Rosita Times,* telephoned. "I heard you're going to the Yucatan," he said. "How about writing two or three freelance travel articles for us? There's such a big group going from Santa Rosita."

She was speechless. She had worked there as a summer intern while in college, but she'd written mostly community news and obituaries. "Thanks, but I've never —"

"I've got a tip sheet on writing travel articles for you."

"The only thing I've ever written that's remotely similar was that series on local parks and historic areas."

"You did a good job," he said, surprising her further. Tom Timmons was more apt to criticize than to praise.

"We can't pay much," he continued, "but I have a list of ten or twelve biweeklies and weeklies in other circulation areas. You can probably resell the articles to them if you do a good job — a little self-syndication. Are you game?"

"I'll be right over." After all, she did have a degree in journalism, Paula thought, though she'd made little use of it so far. Surely she could write the articles. Most likely, there was no one else to write them for the *Santa Rosita Times* anyhow.

She ran a comb through her hair and grabbed her handbag, pausing in the kitchen to tell her mother about the phone call.

"How would Tom Timmons know?" her mother asked, looking up from making potato salad at the kitchen table.

"I suppose Gayle mentioned it. I called her last night to say I was going on the trip."

"Maybe an exciting job will come of your doing the articles."

"Maybe," Paula answered with a laugh, then kissed the top of her mother's head before hurrying out.

Climbing into her white Cutlass, she realized that her spirits had lifted since she'd decided to go on the trip. Perhaps those who said the best way to forget heartbreak was to run away were right. At any rate, the Yucatan's ancient Mayan civilization would serve as an excellent preoccupation.

At the old downtown *Times* office, she noted that little had changed: the same scarred yellow oak desks, familiar stacks of files, and paperwork everywhere. Tom Timmons looked as harried as usual, even for a Saturday morning, his thatch of gray hair as wild as ever, his paunch a trifle larger.

"You'll do a good job, Paula." He handed over the tip sheet and the list of newspapers to which she might resell rights. "You've always been conscientious, always will be. Just give us lots of people interest . . . the ancient and contemporary Mayans, maybe a little on the Spanish conquistadors. Not the people in the Santa Rosita tour group. We don't want a social piece."

He hurried to a nearby cubicle and emerged with rolls of film. "Here's a dozen rolls. We'll develop them for you."

Still amazed, Paula could only shake her head and smile as she watched him stuff the film into a crumpled old lunch bag from his desk drawer. "I'll do my best," she promised.

"If you have any trouble handling both note-taking and photography, don't forget that Matt Montgomery used to get decent pictures for us when he was in high school. Tell him I'll up the price from five to ten dollars for each picture we print."

"I'll tell him." She repressed a laugh. The last thing Matt needed now was ten dollars a picture!

When she returned home, her mother had a message for her. "Gayle called. She said you should wear something pretty and that Matt will pick you up at seven."

"Matt?"

"Yes. She said it would be you and Matt, and her and Josh for dinner."

"That's the first I've heard of it!" She'd thought that she and Gayle would be alone, sending out for a pizza like old times.

"You didn't know?"

Paula shook her head. Probably the dinner was Gayle's way of breaking the news of her engagement to Josh. She had invited Matt to buffer the impact of her and Josh's joy — to keep memories of Tony at bay. "It sounds like it's all arranged," she said.

Her mother looked at her uneasily. "There's something bothering me about it, Paula."

"What?" It wasn't like her mother to interfere.

"Matt," she replied hesitantly. "I don't want you to be hurt again, and I know you used to idolize him. And . . . well . . . the fact of the matter is that his mother confided something unsettling." She stopped as if to reassess whether to continue.

"What's that?" Paula prompted.

Her mother shrugged with resignation. "It's just that . . . well, he

was such a nice boy, but now he does have a reputation with women. His mother said he's turned into a playboy. She thinks it's his way of dealing with Vanessa's rejection."

"Mrs. Montgomery thinks that's *still* bothering him? That was ten years ago!"

Her mother nodded unhappily. "She's deeply upset about it. Anyhow, I wouldn't take him too seriously if I were you, dear."

"I have no intention of taking him or any other man seriously," Paula stated flatly. "That's the very last thing I'd need now."

"What about Evan Walker?" her mother asked. "You said he was going. I've always thought he was nice."

"He is," Paula replied thoughtfully. "It's just that no sparks ever ignited between us."

"Perhaps you were too young."

When Paula returned to her room to finish unpacking, she was determined to stop thinking about men. She concentrated on choosing a dress for the evening and on thinking about researching the travel articles at the library next week. This afternoon she'd study the travel brochures Gayle had given her so she could at least talk intelligently about the Yucatan tonight. Whatever she did, she would not upset herself and mar Gayle's happiness by brooding over Tony.

She eyed the partially unpacked suitcases and boxes on her bed. After an instant's deliberation, she whisked out the new winter white wool dress she'd bought in Phoenix at the after-Christmas sales.

Shaking out the wrinkles, she hung the dress on a satin hanger. It would be perfect with its soft scarf at the neckline, long sleeves, and slightly flared skirt. Moreover, she would feel comfortable wearing the dress since she'd never worn it with Tony. It held no unpleasant memories.

At precisely seven o'clock the doorbell rang, and Paula hurried to answer it in a flurry of nerves.

Matt stood smiling at the door. "You look lovely, Paula," he said, his low voice lingering on her name.

"Thank you, Matt." She did feel lovely wearing the dress, and in the mirror she'd noticed that the off-white color enhanced the golden highlights in her hair and the blue-green of her eyes. "You look nice yourself."

Nice was an understatement. He was very attractive in a navy blazer and gray slacks. His pale blue shirt and the varied shades of blue in his striped necktie heightened the deep blue of his eyes. His sun-burnished blond hair was slightly brushed to the side — the only possible frame for his firm, square face — but a strand had fallen slightly forward, and she had to resist the impulse to reach up and brush it back for him.

Everything about him looked perfect and was complemented by a musky cologne.

In the living room, her parents eyed him suspiciously, as if torn between his Eagle Scout days and his playboy reputation. She nearly laughed, for they looked as fiercely protective as when she'd gone on her first date.

If Matt noticed their uneasiness, he ignored it, chatting pleasantly about his search for a house in Santa Rosita Hills or a condo on the beach. He seemed uncertain of the life he wanted to lead now that he had sold his company.

As he helped her into her blue velvet jacket, her mother said, "Have a nice time," but her eyes sought Paula's in warning: *Don't get hurt again!*

Outside, Matt opened the passenger door of his pale blue Porsche. "I thought you might prefer to ride," he said.

"I could hardly resist riding in this!" she replied, though it did seem a trifle odd not to walk since Gayle lived less than a block away. A sudden thought struck her: Do women more readily succumb to his charm in a sports car?

As he slid into the driver's seat, she was intensely aware of him and caught him glancing at her. "I thought you might break a heel or twist your ankle if we walked in the dark," he explained.

"Thank you for your concern," she replied, "but I'm not as helpless as I might look."

He laughed lightly as he backed the car out of the driveway. "Women are seldom as helpless as they pretend to be."

She repressed the retort that came to mind: Some men aren't what they pretend to be either! Instead, she stared into the darkness.

"Sorry. That was an uncalled-for remark," he said into the silence.

"Yes," she replied with a smile, "it was."

"I'll do better," he promised.

It occurred to her that he might feel resentment toward women just as, since Tony, she had been harboring bitterness toward men. Yet it seemed unlikely that Matt would still be bitter about Vanessa Starke's throwing him over for Kurt Packard, an older man with money. Matt had been a student at Stanford then, and Vanessa had just finished her first year at a prestigious women's college back East. However, that might explain why he'd pursued work and wealth so relentlessly.

"Thanks for promising not to tell Gayle that I let out the big news," Matt said. "I wouldn't want to spoil anything for her and Josh."

"I'll pretend it's the surprise of the century," she assured him again. "Actually it is amazing . . . Gayle and Josh Granville."

"They seem very happy."

"Good." She glanced at him, far too aware of the confined intimacy

of his sports car. When she was a teenager, she would have given anything to have been in the same car with him. Now she wasn't certain how she felt, only that she must not let herself be too attracted to him.

"Here we are," he said, driving into Gayle's driveway.

As he helped her out of the car, she mused aloud, "Strange that we're all back at home right now."

"Like children," he laughed. "Not that it doesn't have great compensations like decent meals and laundry service."

"And love." Paula remembered how fond Matt's parents had always been of him, then recalled what his mother had said about his being a playboy. Still, she supposed that his mother loved him and that he loved his parents too. "Maybe Gayle's been the smart one all along, living at home."

"Josh says they give each other plenty of breathing space. Her mother and grandmother will no doubt be out tonight."

Matt rang the doorbell of the Olivers' two-story Tudor house, and in moments, Gayle answered, resplendent in a jade dress. "What timely guests!" Her green eyes danced with excitement. "I'm so glad you're here."

Josh joined them in the entry, casually elegant in his tan herringbone sports coat and tan slacks. "Good to see you again, Paula," he said with a glimmer in his eyes.

"It must be at least five years," she said as they shook hands. How he had changed! Instead of the gangly, serious high school boy who'd been Matt's best friend, Josh had matured considerably. Fortunately, his old comical lopsided grin remained.

As they made small talk, Paula realized that Josh had not only become more attractive, but also self-confident and exceedingly happy. He no longer resembled the shy, insecure boy whom everyone thought couldn't possibly live up to his parents' images as pillars of the community or make his way in their prestigious law firm.

While he hung Paula's jacket in the entry closet, she turned to Gayle. With her gamine features she had never been a raving beauty, but she looked radiantly beautiful now.

"Would you believe that Josh is helping me cook dinner?" Gayle asked as they stepped into the oak-paneled living room.

"Josh cooking!" Matt exclaimed. "This I have to see."

"Now, Matt," Josh protested. "Not only am I a budding chef, but we're considering a cooking class in France while we're on our honeymoon. . . ."

Gayle shook her head. "Oh, Josh, you've given it away!"

Josh rolled his eyes skyward. "I did it."

Matt patted his back. "Better you than me, old man." His blue eyes darted to Paula.

"What's all this?" she asked innocently.

Gayle slipped her hand almost shyly into Josh's. "We're engaged," she said, beaming. "And on top of that, we're getting married!"

"Oh, Gayle . . .!" Paula hugged her. "That's the most wonderful news! I'm so happy for you!" She *was,* she thought. The tears blurring her eyes were happiness for Gayle.

"How about me?" Josh asked, and Paula reached up to kiss his cheek.

"Oh, you'd better be good to my best friend!" she warned him half-jokingly.

"I will," Josh promised with his familiar lopsided grin. "Don't worry, I will." He slipped an arm proudly around Gayle's shoulder.

Paula examined the two of them together. Despite nearly ten inches of difference in height, they looked a perfect match, and so in love that they seemed to radiate joy. "I want to fix this sight in my memory," she said.

Matt shook his head hopelessly. "These two lovebirds are to be our roommates on the trip!"

Paula laughed. "I don't think we'll be seeing a whole lot of them."

As they sat down on the curved white living room couch, Gayle said, "Paula, I hope you'll be my maid of honor for the wedding."

"I can't think of anything I'd rather do!" Paula exclaimed, rushing to hug her friend again.

"I don't know," Josh remarked, "Matt didn't react like that when I asked him to be my best man."

They all laughed, and Paula tried to hide her momentary surprise. There was really nothing astonishing about Matt's being the best man — it was just that once again they would be thrown together.

Gayle jumped up. "I'm going to burn the dinner! Excuse me!"

"We'll give you a hand," Matt said, and they all trailed happily behind Gayle.

The spacious old kitchen was redolent with the tantalizing smells of French onion soup and *boeuf bourguignon.* Paula, set to work stirring the aromatic beef stew, was surprised to see that Matt knew how to cook the homemade noodles.

When they carried the hot dishes into the Tudor-beamed dining room, a fire crackled in the huge fireplace, and romantic music surrounded them. Lighting the candles on the table, Paula looked up and found Matt watching her intently. She quickly dropped her eyes. He probably assumed that Gayle had set up this romantic dinner to ensnare them too.

"It looks like you two are marvelous cooks," she said to Gayle and Josh as they all sat down for dinner. There were brown pottery bowls of French onion soup still bubbling under thick golden crusts of cheese

accompanied by long crusty French bread and rich butter.

"Josh came by last night to help me start the dinner."

"We used nearly every pot in the kitchen," he laughed.

Matt chuckled. "I can't believe you're becoming so domestic."

"You haven't seen anything yet!" Josh retorted. "We're going to buy a house out in the country and fill it with flowers and cats and dogs and . . ." He turned to Gayle.

"And lots of children," she added with a blush.

"Oh, Gayle," Paula sighed. "I'm so very happy for you." She felt a twinge of envy, then reminded herself that there was no point in yearning for what she would probably never have — a house, a husband, two or three darling children, and love filling every corner of her life. She had dreamed of that with Tony, and he had hedged so cleverly. She quickly turned her attention to the others again, but a love song filling the room with its familiar words and melody didn't make forgetting any easier.

After helping Gayle clear away the soup bowls and bring in the salad, she sat down and found Matt watching her again. "Penny for your thoughts," she ventured, sounding braver than she felt.

He smiled, but his blue eyes were serious. "Cost you a thousand dollars."

"That's far too expensive for me," she said lightly and began to eat the vinaigrette salad and the mouthwatering *boeuf bourguignon.* She hoped he wasn't thinking that she was one of those . . . women he picked up and dropped just as quickly.

The conversation drifted to the June wedding. After a few minutes, Paula noticed Matt's overconcentration on buttering his French bread, and she took pity on him. After all, they were both in the same situation — happy for their friends, but feeling left out. "Are you ready for the Yucatan trip?" she asked him.

"Almost. I do have to spend most of next week in Sunnyvale to tie up loose ends."

Gayle raised a hand toward them. "Don't forget the pretrip meeting here tomorrow night. Paula, why don't you tell Matt about Dr. Zayere while Josh and I clear the table."

Paula told Matt the gist of it, enjoying the memories herself. Gayle had become enthused with archeology at the university, and her enthusiasm had been contagious. Her favorite professor, Dr. Zayere, had made ancient people come so alive, the two of them had even joined him and others on a New Mexico dig for a week last summer. "It was marvelous," she finished, "the experience of a lifetime — and addicting."

"I've never been on a dig," Matt responded, "but that's exactly how I felt about the ruins in Greece and Italy — addicted."

"And I thought you'd kept your nose to the grindstone these last few years!"

He laughed softly. "I did break away occasionally."

She recalled the travel pieces she would be writing for the *Santa Rosita Times* and told them about it. "Did you suggest my writing the articles to Tom Timmons?" she asked Gayle, who was carrying in a luscious chocolate torte.

Gayle shrugged. "I might have dropped a hint. After all, you did work for them all those summers."

Paula shook her head. "Anyhow, I'm going to do it." She turned to Matt. "I'm supposed to tell you that Tom wouldn't mind your doing the photography. He's upping the pay to ten dollars per published picture."

Gayle and Josh laughed uproariously.

Matt chuckled, then turned serious. "I'll think about it."

"You're joking," Paula said.

"Not at all," he replied.

The evening ended with all four of them in the living room studying a map of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula and tracing their route. They perused the Yucatan brochures on the coffee table. Besides exotic Mayan pyramids, there were colonial cathedrals, thatch-roofed houses of contemporary Mayans in native costumes, and turquoise Caribbean waters curling onto sandy white beaches.

"I almost forgot," Paula said, handing Gayle her check for the trip. She felt an instant's concern; the amount was a major portion of her savings.

"I almost forgot to tell you," Gayle commented somewhat uneasily, "Vanessa Starke Packard may be coming."

Suddenly numb, Paula turned toward Matt.

"Vanessa?" he asked with an odd expression.

Gayle nodded as if it were the most natural development in the world. "Her mother and stepfather had signed up, but the doctor advised her stepfather not to go. Vanessa just happens to be visiting her parents. It seems she's getting a divorce."

Paula's spirits plummeted. Of all people to have along!

"She called the agency this afternoon about tomorrow night's pretrip meeting."

"More of the old school group," Matt murmured offhandedly.

Paula made an effort at nonchalance. "How many from Santa Rosita High does that make?"

"Fourteen," Gayle replied. "And twelve from the city."

"A nice-sized group," Josh commented.

The discussion drifted to the various people who would travel with them, and Paula tried to focus on that.

Moments later, she was surprised to find Matt slipping an arm around her shoulders. "Ready to go home?" he asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Yes . . . of course." The feeling of his fingers through the light wool of her sleeves sent a shiver down her spine.

As they left, Paula kissed Gayle and Josh again. "I'm so happy for both of you. I can't think of anyone I'd rather see in love."

Josh chuckled, and the amusement dancing in Gayle's eyes said, "I can and it's you!"

Paula was pleased that Matt drove straight home. As he stopped in her driveway, she reached to open her own door. "I can let myself out. . . ."

But he was too fast and his hands grasped her shoulders, turning her, gathering her to him as her heart thumped wildly.

Her brain flashed, Resist! Her emotions were reeling, and in the moonlight his ardent gaze overcame all reason.

"Paula," he whispered, just as she had once dreamed he might. He tilted her chin toward his face. His warm lips explored hers tentatively, tasting, searching, testing for resistance.

She tried to push away, but suddenly she was helpless against the rising insistence of his lips. *Oh, Matt!* her heart cried out. Her arms moved around him naturally, her hands caressing his neck. *So this is what it's like to really be kissed,* an inner voice said, and a silvery shower of light exploded behind her eyelids. *Oh, Matt!* her heart cried again and again.

For long moments, she forgot all of her doubts, but finally sanity returned. She fought for control, bringing her hands against his chest to press away. "No!" she whispered. "Please, no."

Though Matt softened his hold on her, he kept her close in his arms. "It's not as if we don't know each other, Paula."

Her pulse beat wildly again, and he drew her closer.

"Don't!" she pleaded quickly. "Please let me go in."

He hesitated, then moved away. At her front door he asked, "May I pick you up tomorrow night for the meeting?"

She occupied herself with digging in her handbag for the house key. "Thank you, I'm not sure. . . ."

"Paula?" Matt whispered, and she knew that he wanted to kiss her again.

She quickly unlocked and opened the door. "Thank you! Thanks for driving!" She tried to slip in, but his hand was on her waist, and he turned her toward him to drop a kiss on her forehead.

"Good night, Paula," he murmured huskily. "I'll pick you up at ten to seven."

She nodded unthinkingly. When she closed the door, she realized

how unsteady her knees felt, how foolish she'd been to let this happen. As she made her way slowly upstairs, she recalled that his own mother had called him a playboy. And her mother had warned her. Paula told herself firmly, *Never, ever again!*

On Sunday morning she agonized over whether she should let Matt pick her up for the pretrip meeting, conjuring up excuses to avoid him. She could play sick, but then she'd miss hearing Dr. Zayere; moreover, she didn't want to lie. Perhaps she could ask Gayle about coming early to help with refreshments. That seemed the better choice, although she'd have to call Matt to tell him.

When she telephoned Gayle, her response was, "Wonderful! We'd love to have your help!"

In the afternoon, just moments before she talked herself into calling Matt, he phoned her. "I just saw Gayle at the supermarket," he began. "They need help to move furniture around, and she said that you were giving her a hand with refreshments. We'd better leave around six."

Paula swallowed hard. "Fine." So much for deviousness.

As she dressed in her powder blue skirt and sweater, she wondered why she felt she must avoid Matt. She would never again trust men. . . .

By the time he arrived, she had tired of analyzing herself. She would have a fine time, enjoy Dr. Zayere and her fellow tourists, and walk home if she felt like it. After all, this was no date — it was only a ride to Gayle's house!

At the door, Matt met her with a steadfast gleam in his eyes. "Ready, Paula?" He looked terribly respectable in his pale blue cashmere pullover sweater, white shirt open at the collar, and gray wool slacks — very much the innocent gentleman, as if there'd been nothing between them last night.

"Ready," she replied, though not certain for what. She was wearing her navy blue coat to avoid his helping her into it, his being too close.

"Drive or walk?" he asked.

After considering her high heels and the possibility of Matt grabbing her if she stumbled on the sidewalk, she decided, "Drive, I guess."

In the blue Porsche she remembered last night's kiss and stared straight ahead. Matt rambled on about the unseasonably warm weather and then about the Yucatan as if he'd forgotten what had happened between them. Moments later, he announced, "Here we are."

Inside Gayle's house, Paula hurried to the kitchen, and Matt headed for the living room to help Josh. She occupied herself with arranging nuts, cheeses, and crackers in bowls and plates, and with washing the dusty punch glasses.

"All done," Gayle said. "We can take everything into the dining room."

Paula hung back.

Her friend laughed. "What's gotten into you?"

A flush rose on Paula's face. "I guess I was thinking."

Gayle looked at her suspiciously, but said nothing as they walked into the living room. Matt and Josh were taping a map of Mexico to the huge Tudor fireplace. Rows of folding chairs augmented the living room furniture for the meeting.

"Everything looks super!" Gayle exclaimed.

"So do you two," Josh returned.

Matt turned to Paula. "You look very nice in blue."

She allowed herself a fast smile. "Thank you."

"It happens to be my favorite color," he added.

"Who would have guessed?" Josh teased. "Blue car, blue sweater, blue suits . . ."

Matt chuckled, but Paula decided she should have guessed. He probably suspected she'd worn her powder blue sweater and skirt to please him. Between her outfit and his pullover sweater, people would very likely be amused; the two of them resembled over-age high school steadies.

The doorbell rang, and Gayle hurried to answer it.

Paula speculated that it wouldn't be Vanessa Starke Packard arriving early. Vanessa struck her as the type who arrived fashionably late. Evan Walker was out of town. Paula barely knew any of the expected guests, all of whom were older. It seemed that no one else from her and Gayle's high school class could afford the time or the money for the trip.

Gayle ushered in an elderly couple and introduced them.

By seven o'clock the living and dining rooms were crowded with excited fellow travelers sipping punch while discussing what to pack and where to buy the best bargains in the Yucatan.

Dr. Zayere, a cherub of a man with heavy glasses, was one of the last to arrive, and Paula stepped forward to greet him. "How wonderful of you to come to speak to us."

"My pleasure, Paula," he responded with his usual enthusiasm. "It's worth it just to see you and Gayle again, to know that my teaching interested you enough to visit the Yucatan." They chatted a moment longer, then it was time for him to make his way through the crowd among the folding chairs to the front of the room.

Paula sat down in the last row near the door to let in latecomers and found Matt coming to sit beside her.

"Are you upset about last night?" he asked.

She lifted her shoulders lightly. "I'd rather not discuss it." Like Tony, he would probably only try to sweet-talk his way into her favor again — until another woman came along.

Matt's arm moved protectively around the back of her folding chair,

and she couldn't help remembering last night in his car. "Listen, Paula —"

Gayle clapped her hands for attention at the front of the room, and Paula quickly turned away from Matt as the meeting began, wondering what it was he'd been about to say. When he removed his arm from the back of her chair and faced forward, she was torn between regret and relief.

It wasn't until Dr. Zayere was introduced that Vanessa and her mother made their entrance, capturing every eye in the room. Vanessa, as sleek as ever, wore an exquisite leopard jacket over black slacks and sweater. With her amber eyes and raven hair in a French twist, she was even more beautiful than she'd been as a fashion model during high school.

Paula rose to show her to the empty seats, but Vanessa's eyes swept past her to Matt.

"Well, look who we have here," she murmured silkily.

As if she didn't know he was going on the trip! Paula thought with annoyance, then felt a stab of remorse. Despite her dislike of Vanessa, she'd always felt a little sorry for her too. It couldn't have been easy for Vanessa, being a cocktail waitress's daughter from the wrong side of Santa Rosita, struggling to make money and to be popular too. Finally her mother had married an elderly bar owner associated with organized crime. Then there'd been plenty of money for transforming Vanessa into what they considered high society — an undertaking begun while she was a senior in high school, after Matt was at Stanford.

Matt helped the women remove their coats, and Paula's eyes went to Vanessa's figure — slim except for her voluptuous bosom, which was conspicuously displayed in a low-cut black sweater. Despite her impending divorce, she seemed no worse for wear; if anything, she was more beautiful. And, of course, wealthier.

Paula dug in her handbag for a small notebook and pencil. Dr. Zayere was already speaking, and she forced herself to concentrate on his words. She would need to learn all that she could for the travel articles.

"The ancient people who inhabited the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico and much of the surrounding land came from the unknown, out of the depths of mystery," he said with his usual dramatic flair. "We call them the Maya. But they had different names for themselves, many of which are now lost. For an amazing fifteen centuries . . . *fifteen centuries!* . . . they flourished in Middle America. Between A.D. 250 and 900 they shaped a magnificent civilization — a civilization that included splendid palaces and soaring temples."

Dr. Zayere was as ebullient as ever, Paula thought with pleasure and hoped that she could bring such enthusiasm to her articles. She noticed

that Matt was taking notes. It wasn't terribly surprising since he'd been a brilliant student and was probably interested in ancient civilizations too.

"They were an amazing people," Dr. Zayere said. "While Europeans still lived in caves, the Maya's astronomy was so precise that their calendar was as accurate as ours today! They plotted the course of celestial bodies so effectively that the priests could predict both lunar and solar eclipses . . . much to the awe of their followers. They calculated the path of the elusive planet, Venus — our morning and evening star."

As Dr. Zayere stepped to the map of Mexico and Central America behind him, Paula glanced at Matt and found him looking at her. Surprised, she smiled uncertainly and turned her attention to the map again.

"This thumblike protrusion jutting out between the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea is the Yucatan Peninsula," Dr. Zayere explained. "Only recently have scholars lighted the dim past of the Maya who lived in the Yucatan. The Mayan city-states and dynasties are beginning to come into focus.

He paused dramatically. "What emerges is a peaceful people who practiced esoteric religious rites in the vastness of the jungle until they merged with a warlike people. Later, during the Post-Classic Period — about A.D. 900 until the Spanish conquest — a sixteenth-century Spanish bishop said this about the changing Maya: 'The occupation to which they are most inclined is trading.' "

Matt chuckled. "Sounds like they fell from academic geniuses to businessmen."

Paula smiled. She noticed that Vanessa looked up at him, perplexed, before inspecting her bright, coral fingernails again.

As Dr. Zayere continued, Paula was grateful for the review, jotting the dates of the Mayan civilizations.

"When I consider the remnants of the Mayan civilization," Dr. Zayere said, "it's always with a sense of tragedy. The rise and fall of the Maya bring to light not only man's capacity for greatness, but also his affinity for doom."

Paula reflected on her own affinity for doom with men as she saw Vanessa's hand resting on Matt's arm while she whispered something that brought a smile to his lips.

Dr. Zayere continued. "We have learned about the ancient Mayans in numerous ways: through archeology with its unearthing of buildings, stelae, and inscriptions; through chronicles in which the Mayans presented a version of their own history — one even mentioned a great flood such as we read about in the Bible; and through accounts by Spanish conquerors and friars who recorded Mayan practices. And,

finally, we have the remaining Maya."

"There are Maya living today?" someone asked.

"Yes, a few who survived in scattered villages. Some still speak the old languages, but their bloodlines are diluted and their distant past forgotten. Today they are more apt to use a primitive slash-and-burn method of farming; during the peak of their civilization they used sophisticated agricultural techniques that supported a large population."

Vanessa sat up in interest when the talk turned to the elite class, the small group of priests and leaders charged with preserving knowledge.

"These people understood art, architecture, engineering, and astronomy. In return, they led privileged lives. Luxuries like jade, feathers, and jaguar pelts were reserved for them," Dr. Zayere said. "When the elite traveled, it was the duty of the commoners to carry them in litters on their shoulders."

After Dr. Zayere concluded his talk, Vanessa said, "They could have kept the feathers, but I wouldn't have minded the jade and the jaguar coats."

"You're already wearing a leopard skin jacket," Matt pointed out.

Vanessa smiled wryly. "But I could use a jaguar full-length coat."

The meeting ended with Gayle explaining final details of the itinerary and where to meet at the Los Angeles airport. After it was over, Paula quickly slipped into the dining room to refill the punch bowl.

When the crowd began to thin, Paula flinched to see Vanessa and her mother talking with Dr. Zayere, and Matt standing behind them. Passing by, she overheard the women ask the professor about buying pre-Columbian artifacts.

"That's strictly against the law," Dr. Zayere said. "The authorities take a dim view of it."

"But it is done, isn't it?" Vanessa asked.

"Yes, unfortunately it is." He glanced away momentarily, as if he were anxious to escape.

Paula stepped forward. "Thank you again for the excellent talk, Dr. Zayere. It was a marvelous review for me."

"My pleasure, Paula. Now, if we can find Gayle, I should be on my way."

Paula spotted Gayle and waved her over.

As they escorted Dr. Zayere to the door, Paula turned and caught a glimpse of the living room. Matt stood with an arm around Vanessa's shoulder, and she had an arm around his waist. Paula's emotions swung from shock to hurt, then to anger. They were laughing with old school friends, and it struck Paula that they looked just as they had walking home together from high school years ago: the stunningly beautiful Vanessa Starke and the handsome Matt Montgomery.

Paula grabbed her coat from the entry closet. "I'll walk Dr. Zayere to his car," she said to Gayle.

"That's not necessary," he demurred.

Gayle frowned.

"I'm walking home anyway," Paula stated firmly. She slipped into her coat as she stepped outdoors. "Please tell Matt a bit later, Gayle."

"Oh, Paula!" Gayle protested in dismay.

"See you," Paula replied before hurrying down the walk with Dr. Zayere. She did not want to compete with Vanessa or any other woman for a man — particularly not a man like Matt, whose interest in women was fleeting.

After saying good-night to Dr. Zayere, she rushed home in the moonlight. Why invite more heartache, more torment by waiting for Matt? she reflected, already angry with herself for her interest in him. Wouldn't Matt just turn out to be like Tony . . . and most other men?

3

In the afternoons Paúla sunned herself by the neighborhood pool, researching the Yucatan in books she'd picked up at the library; she was determined to be reasonably knowledgeable about the Mexican peninsula by Saturday. She tried to forget Matt, yet thoughts of him cropped up continually.

Every time she opened the gate to the pool complex, she hoped he'd be there, then assiduously avoided "his chaise lounge." As if that would help matters — she knew he was in Sunnyvale on business!

At least I'm acquiring a deep tan, she thought, thankful to an unknown Swedish ancestor from whom she'd inherited her coloring. Moreover, she was learning a great deal about the ancient Mayan civilization, the Spanish conquistadors, and modern Cancun.

On Friday while packing her suitcase, she cast occasional glances out her upstairs window at the street in front of Matt's house. No sign of him. He'd probably meet them at the airport tomorrow, flying directly in from the Bay Area.

She tried to focus on packing her wardrobe for the trip. Fortunately this time the prospects were more exciting than when she'd fled Phoenix. If the *Times* articles worked out well, perhaps she'd do more travel writing; perhaps she could eventually become a travel editor for a newspaper.

After dinner Gayle phoned. "Josh is driving his family's old station wagon so we can fit in all of the luggage."

"I don't mind sitting in back with a suitcase or two," Paula said. Most of their luggage would fit into a car's trunk; everyone was allowed only a large suitcase and a carry-on case.

"You're sitting in back with Matt," Gayle announced.

"With Matt?"

Gayle ignored her surprise. "And this time you're not walking!"

"Not likely!" Los Angeles was over an hour's drive away. "I thought he'd be meeting us at the airport. You didn't say —"

"He's meeting us at nine tomorrow morning at his house. I didn't tell you for fear you'd flee again."

"Oh, Gayle. I'm not *that* bad!"

"Almost," Gayle responded in a wry tone.

Had Matt arrived home early and purposely stayed out of sight? Perhaps he was furious with her for walking home from the meeting at Gayle's house. Most probably he'd been so preoccupied with Vanessa that he'd forgotten her anyhow.

The next morning, moments after Josh's station wagon pulled into her driveway, Matt came striding up the sidewalk.

Paula glanced at herself in the entry mirror and was amazed at the cheerful young woman whose blue-green eyes sparkled with anticipation. She patted back her hair, then opened the door before he could knock. "Hi," she said, only a trifle unnerved at the sight of him.

"Good morning, Paula," he responded with a dazzling smile.

Sunshine streamed through the trees, dappling her and Matt with its golden warmth. For an instant it reminded her of the morning she had brought him the armful of roses from the garden.

"All ready?" he asked.

"Ready!" His wire-rimmed sunglasses hid his eyes, but he didn't sound angry with her for walking out on him. He probably hadn't considered their going to Gayle's house together a date either.

She gathered up her shoulder bag, attaché and blue carry-on case, then found herself smiling at his casual light blue blazer and navy pants. People might suspect they'd planned coordinating outfits again! She'd worn her navy blazer and light blue skirt.

He lifted her suitcase with ease. "You look like a California girl," he said.

"A California girl? Oh, the tan!" She laughed, pulling the front door shut behind her. "I lounged around the pool afternoons."

Sunlight glimmered around them as they turned to start down the sidewalk. In the distance a bird sang and leaves fluttered on the trees. She found Matt looking at her with a curious smile. "Isn't it a glorious morning?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied. "Yes, it certainly is."

She had the sudden impression she was embarking on the adventure of her lifetime — and that it concerned Matt and the Yucatan and . . . something she couldn't quite put a finger on.

In the car, Gayle and Josh looked as ebullient as she felt.

"Excited?" Gayle asked.

"I can't wait," Paula confessed. She glanced at Matt to see if he thought her childish.

"Anticipation is supposed to be half the fun of a trip," he remarked with genuine enthusiasm.

"You'd think we were a carful of kids starting out for a circus," Josh

said as they pulled out of the driveway and started down the tree-lined street.

"Aren't we?" Gayle inquired brightly, and they all laughed.

Saturday morning traffic was still light in Santa Rosita; even the freeways were surprisingly uncrowded as they approached the Los Angeles airport area. Josh parked the car in a lot, and within minutes, they were sitting on an airport bus, then unloading bags beside the airport terminal.

As they checked their luggage Josh said to Paula and Matt, "No sense in you two sitting around with Gayle and me. We'll have to sit at the gate to gather the group. Why don't you have a cup of coffee?"

"How about it?" Matt asked Paula.

"Fine." She'd been too excited to have breakfast, and coffee sounded good. Besides, he'd removed his sunglasses, and his blue eyes were terribly convincing.

"I'll take your carry-on case," Gayle offered.

"If you're sure —" Paula gratefully handed over her case, and Josh took Matt's camera bag.

"Are you really going to take pictures for the *Santa Rosita Times?*" she teased Matt as they made their way through the crowded airport.

"Why not?" he replied with an unabashed smile. "I've always enjoyed photography. Besides, you're not the only one who's unemployed."

"Unemployed?" She laughed. From what Gayle had implied, Matt could retire for life.

Heading for the cafeteria, she realized this was the first time they had been alone since they'd driven to Dr. Zayere's talk. She owed Matt an apology for walking out on him. Finally she managed, "I'm sorry about leaving so abruptly from Gayle's house Sunday night. It's just that I . . ."

"Let's forget it," he said, looking away over the airport crowd.

For an instant she suspected that he'd been hurt, but how could that be? After all, *he* had kissed her passionately one night, then put his arm around Vanessa the next. Still, it might have been merely a companionable gesture on his part, a response to Vanessa's arm around him.

In the cafeteria Paula bypassed the crowd and headed for the coffee. Matt stopped at the pie counter. "I'll get seats," she called over to him, and he nodded. Paying for her coffee, she spied two seats being vacated in the dimly lit room.

Hurrying to them, she sat down and placed her attaché case on the adjacent chair. As she settled back, she watched Matt in the cashier's line. Women of all ages stared at him, reminding her that it would be especially foolish to become involved with him. If only she'd evaded his kiss!

After paying, he stood in front of the cashier with his orange plastic tray looking for her.

Paula rose. "Over here!"

He approached grinning. "I was waylaid by the pies."

She laughed. "And two pieces! Do you always eat pie for breakfast?"

"Only with conspirators," he answered, placing a wedge of pie in front of her. "I hope you like blueberry."

"I love it, thank you. How did you know?"

He disposed of the cafeteria tray and grinned. "We both apparently like blue."

"You noticed." She was astonished to find herself blushing and quickly turned to her pie. Trying a forkful, she thought it surprisingly delicious for cafeteria fare.

"I've noticed a good deal about you lately," Matt said.

"That I've grown up?" she ventured.

A mischievous glow lit his eyes. "Yes, that you've certainly grown up."

"Anything else?"

"That you look . . .," he began, but his airy response faltered for an instant. "Twice as delicious as blueberry pie."

She darted an incredulous look at him. "Really!"

He chuckled.

She turned away from his disconcerting eyes and concentrated on eating the pie. What sort of a line does he use on Vanessa? she thought. Surely nothing that corny. He'd do better with jade and jaguar coats with her!

Later, in the boarding lounge, most of the Santa Rosita group had already gathered, although Vanessa and her mother were nowhere in sight.

"Paula! Paula Ingraham!"

She turned to find Evan Walker hurrying toward her. "Evan! It's good to see you again."

"It's been a few years," he said, shaking her hand. His soft brown eyes brimmed with pleasure from behind fashionable horn-rimmed glasses. "You look wonderful . . . just wonderful!"

She laughed. "Thanks." If Evan said so, she must look fine. "You look great yourself," she added, watching his flush of delight. He'd matured, but it didn't distract from his boyish handsomeness. She supposed he was twenty-five now since he'd been two years ahead of her in school. His shoulders had broadened as if he worked out in a gym. Just under six feet, he looked attractive with his dark brown, stylishly cut hair.

The loudspeaker crackled. "Now boarding Flight 329 —"

"See you later, Paula," he said. "I have to get my things. I'm glad you're on the trip."

She smiled, pleased Evan was going too.

Half of the group had boarded the plane when Vanessa and her mother arrived — Vanessa looking like a movie star in a white silk pants suit, her gleaming black hair again up in an elegant French twist. Heads turned all over the boarding lounge to admire her, but she proceeded directly to Matt.

"I had a ship-to-shore call at the last minute," she explained breathlessly. "Seems I'm staying on after this tour with friends in Cozumel. They're sailing their yacht over from the Mediterranean now."

Matt raised his eyebrows. "Must be a good-sized yacht."

"They're Arabs in oil," she answered blithely. "You're welcome to join us."

He looked impressed. "Thank you. I'd like to think about it, if I may."

He certainly would think about that! Paula thought, disheartened. Stepping into the boarding tunnel ahead of them, she recalled reading about Cozumel, a Mexican island on the Caribbean. It sounded exactly like Vanessa's kind of place — where the jet set had fun in the sun.

On the DC-9, Paula made her way to her window seat, struggling to avoid disappointment. She stowed her blue carry-on case under the seat and forced a bright smile when Matt arrived to sit beside her. He would probably be sitting with Vanessa if she hadn't been so late. Glancing back, she saw that Vanessa and her mother were settling several rows behind them on the other side of the aisle.

When the plane roared across the runway, Paula pulled out a paperback about the nineteenth-century discovery of the Mayan civilization. Before she could begin to read, Matt was full of questions about the book, then about her research.

"I've always been fascinated by ancient civilizations," he remarked. "I envy you and Gayle taking part in an archeological dig. I'd like to try it myself."

"It was wonderful." She eyed him thoughtfully. "I'd think that archeology would be the last thing to interest a businessman. After all, no one makes money digging up the past . . . except those who loot ruins and sell artifacts."

He chuckled. "There are businessmen and there are businessmen. I've yet to loot anything, let alone sell artifacts. I'm still pretty much the Matt Montgomery who grew up next door to you."

"Oh?" she replied. "I rather doubt that."

He gave a laugh. "Well, maybe not quite."

When the Fasten Seat Belts sign winked off, Gayle and Josh made their way down the aisle, stopping to say a few words to all of the tour

members.

Paula glanced in their direction. "Aren't they a beautiful couple?"

"They do look good together," he agreed, amused. "Josh looks as happy as a —" He stopped, his color deepening.

"As happy as what?" she laughed, certain he'd nearly said "happy as a fool."

"As happy as I've ever seen him," Matt answered, embarrassed.

As their conversation continued, she recalled that Gayle and Josh had always known each other, but Josh was seven years older than Gayle — just like Matt and herself. "Do you know how they happened to get together?" she asked.

"Josh said they met at a church dinner. His parents had invited him to hear a speaker about the space program, and Gayle was serving desserts," Matt grinned. "Josh always did have a sweet tooth."

Paula smiled. "And Gayle's always helping at church. I don't think she's missed a Sunday in years since her father's death, and that was back in grade school."

"So that's why . . .," Matt began. He hesitated, then apparently changed his line of thought. "Josh attends church now too. I can't get over how he's changed."

"Oh, really?"

"He was turning into quite a drinker. He was pretty unnerved, being expected to follow in the family footsteps. They're a formidable force in the community."

She nodded. "He did seem shy."

"Law school changed him a little," Matt said, "but he was still basically insecure. At first I thought his falling in love with Gayle made him turn around, but it's more than that. He's given over his life to Christ." The tone of Matt's voice seemed carefully neutral, as if disguising his impression that Josh had gone off the deep end.

Paula blinked. "Really?"

"I take it you don't attend church anymore?" he said.

"I make it for Christmas and weddings."

She'd gone to Sunday school with Gayle when they were girls but had stopped in her teens. She recalled singing with the children's choir in a Youth Sunday when Matt had spoken from the pulpit, though she couldn't remember what they had sung, nor what he had said. She'd been in fourth grade then; he, a junior in high school. She supposed he had drifted away from church too.

Matt extracted the airline magazine from the seat pocket in front of him and opened it, bringing the discussion to an end.

Paula looked out the plane window. Los Angeles and its endless suburbs and smog lay behind them. Craggy foothills rose above the mist in the valleys, and here and there the sun shimmered on lakes and

rivers, transforming them into golden mirrors. An appropriate perspective from which to think about God, though she rarely did. It was an uncomfortable subject, and she wished it hadn't been broached between them.

The airline's lunch featured a beef tostada. And, of course, there was "Coca," as the Mexican flight attendant called the cola given to everyone. "The national drink of Mexico," she joked with Paula and Matt.

After lunch Vanessa stopped by in the aisle. "Just getting my exercise." Her amber eyes took in the two of them, but she did not return Paula's smile. She handed Matt a brochure. "It tells about Cozumel. Just in case you decide to go."

"Thanks," he replied.

"Several airlines fly there from Cancun all day long."

"You've been there before?" he asked her.

"Yes, but I've always flown in from Mexico City or Paris."

Matt glanced from her to the brochure. "Very interesting."

"Keep it for a while," Vanessa responded. She leaned over to whisper in his ear, the V of her silk jacket affording him a glimpse of her ample cleavage.

Paula looked away.

When Vanessa moved on down the aisle, Paula glanced at the map of Cozumel in the brochure Matt was perusing; she especially noted an *isla de la pasion*. She didn't remember much high school Spanish, but she knew an "island of passion" when she saw it. Turning to the window, she reminded herself that what went on between Matt and Vanessa was none of her affair. She looked out at the majestic mountain ranges protruding from the earth.

After a while Matt asked, "What's out there now?" Unfastening his seat belt, he leaned across her to glance out.

The faint muskiness of his aftershave affected her oddly again. "A wrinkled land," she replied, remembering the phrase from her research. "When the King of Spain asked Cortez what Mexico looked like, he crumpled a piece of paper in his hand to show how mountainous it was."

"Is that so?" he asked with a peculiar smile, his face close to hers.

She nodded and was relieved when he sat back in his seat. Just sitting next to him was more than enough for her to handle, she thought, entranced with his broad hand on the armrest. As he refastened his seat belt, she averted her eyes, hoping that he didn't sense her interest.

"I take it the Yucatan won't be mountainous," he said.

"It's flat from what I've read. But it's so isolated from mainland Mexico by mountains that the Yucatecs once planned to form their own nation. The children were educated in New Orleans or Europe, and

their second — and sometimes first — language was French."

"You're a fount of information," he said, grinning.

She shrugged and opened her book. He probably found her a fount of dullness compared to Vanessa.

When they deplaned in Monterrey for Mexican Immigration, Paula purposely hung back so that Matt wouldn't feel obligated to be with her. But he waited, too, until Gayle and Josh joined them, and they walked to the modern airport building together.

Inside, she had only to present a copy of her birth certificate and her tourist card. She noted that Matt, like Vanessa and many of the others, had a passport. Either identification was acceptable with a tourist card, but she felt unsophisticated by comparison. She'd made short trips to Mexico from California, but never to a country requiring a passport. Matt and Vanessa obviously had.

When they reboarded the plane, she was grateful that Matt sat with her again.

Two hours later, they landed in the darkness for a ten-minute stop at Cancun. Most of the passengers deplaned, and only a few tourists and Mexicans boarded for the final leg of the trip to Merida.

"Almost there," Matt said, pulling out his itinerary and sharing it with her as the plane took off again.

Their tour would begin in sixteenth-century Merida, where they'd visit the Mayan ruins of Uxmal and Kabah. Then they'd be bused to the famous ruin of Chichen Itza and stay in a nearby Mayan village. Last came the modern island resort of Cancun for a rest on the beaches and for visiting the ancient Mayan's coastal ruin of Tulum and other nearby points of interest.

Despite her exhaustion, Paula's anticipation mounted. Finally the plane swooped down into the darkness, heading for Merida's lighted runway. "We're here!" She might have applauded if it weren't so unsophisticated.

In the sparkling new airport building, porters dealt with their luggage while the Santa Rosita group met their darkly handsome Mexican tour guide, Jacob. Immaculate in his tan safari-type suit, he smilingly gathered everyone together and led them out into the jasmine-scented night air.

"Our bus," he announced, directing them to the first of three buses waiting along the curb. The small airport parking lot was nearly empty; there was no sound of planes or cars anywhere.

"It's not quite like L.A.'s airport," Paula observed.

"Thank goodness," Matt responded.

She was surprised to find him at her side since Vanessa seemed determined to be near him. Her mother, Mrs. Perotta, walked more slowly, belying her youthful appearance and thwarting Vanessa's efforts to

catch up with Matt.

It seemed only a few minutes before their luggage was loaded and their bus headed through the dark countryside. "Merida is a city of four hundred thousand people," Jacob said into the microphone by the front seat. "We have the lowest crime rate in all of Mexico. Still, you must be careful on the streets. It is not quite heaven."

Matt casually slid his arm around the back of Paula's seat. She felt happily enfolded by his nearness, though she didn't know whether he was displaying affection or only needed to change position. If he were as stiff as she was from sitting all day, it was most likely the latter. In any case, she had to make mental notes for the travel articles and write her impressions before she went to bed.

Jacob continued with details of the area, then of their itinerary. When they entered the city, he pointed out the sights. "Merida is called the 'white city' for its cleanliness, its buildings, and the people's white clothing."

The city did look exceptionally clean, and the Spanish colonial buildings appeared more European than the red tile-roofed buildings of other Mexican cities she'd seen. The lighted parks were lovely, but nearly deserted since it was after ten o'clock. Driving into the downtown area, Jacob added, "And here we have the *zocalo,* Merida's main plaza, with its sixteenth-century cathedral."

Paula gazed out her window. Great Indian laurel trees sprawled over the vast expanse of walks, benches, and bandstand area. Around the plaza, the magnificent cathedral and Spanish colonial buildings were flooded with light, in breathtaking contrast to the midnight-blue sky with its luminous clouds.

"Across the street you can ride in our *calesas,* the antique horse-drawn cabs," Jacob said.

From the bus window, Paula and Matt looked out at the high-wheeled carriages, each with a horse and a driver waiting for passengers. As the bus stopped for a traffic light, a young couple engaged one of the calesas, and climbed into the seats. The young man dropped the rolled shades over the open side and back windows, but there was nothing across the front to prevent watching him passionately claim the young woman in his arms.

Everyone chuckled, and Paula cast a glance at Matt.

He grinned, but said nothing.

She supposed he had kissed dozens of women. Just on this bus with its twenty-six passengers, he had kissed her . . . and certainly Vanessa.

"Around the corner is your hotel, one of Merida's finest," Jacob announced, then gave them final instructions for meeting in the morning for their tour of the city.

As she climbed out of the bus into the silky night air, she glimpsed a

great white colonial hotel. Her exhaustion faded, replaced by a surge of exhilaration. Just ahead on the street was a group of *mariachis* in their elegant black and silver costumes and sombreros, carrying their guitars and other instruments. Delighted, she crossed the street with her group to the hotel.

Inside the hotel's vast white entry and reception salon, roughly hewn beams latticed the soaring ceiling, European carved doors opened to a garden restaurant aptly named Le Jardin, and white marble floors led everywhere. She followed the others toward the dark wooden expanse of registration area where white-suited clerks and bell boys waited attentively.

"Isn't it gorgeous?" she began, turning to Matt.

But he had fallen behind her, and Vanessa was just approaching him, reaching out, then resting her hand on his arm.

"Aren't you going to invite me for a ride around the park in a calesa?" she asked with a meaningful smile.

He looked momentarily flustered but Paula heard him say, "Why not?"

"Then what's keeping us?" Vanessa asked smoothly. "Josh can register you and my mother can register me."

As Matt stepped away with her, Paula saw him glance in her direction. She turned away, her heart plummeting as she stepped to the shortest registration line.

There was no earthly reason why he shouldn't take someone else for a ride around the park. All he had done was to kiss her as if he loved her! He'd said nothing to indicate that they had a special relationship. He had promised nothing, nothing at all.

4

Romantic music drifted through the hotel's courtyard as Paula and Gayle sat at an elegantly appointed breakfast table. Would Matt be down for breakfast? Paula wondered uneasily. And, if so, what could she possibly say to him after last night? If only she could forget his calesa ride with Vanessa.

The huge rubber tree growing in the middle of the garden dining room reminded her to take notes. "I'll have to find out if the trees in the plaza are really Indian laurels." She jotted in her notebook and, turning the page, said, "You know, my research calls those horsedrawn carriages both *calesas* and *calandrias.* Which is correct?"

"Beats me," Gayle said. "You'd better check with Jacob."

Paula drew a huge question mark beside the words. Just the thought of antique carriages and of Matt and Vanessa clippity-clopping off into the night made her spirits droop.

When she looked up, Gayle's green eyes were studying her. "You're still crazy about Matt, aren't you?"

Paula looked down at her notebook. "I don't know. . . ."

"You and your 'I don't knows!' " Gayle replied with a shake of her head. "Someone like Vanessa will walk off with him while you make up your mind. And I've got an idea she's after him again."

"What do you suggest?" She was torn between competing furiously for him and not being vulnerable again. Her only effort this morning, if it could even be called that, was to wear her pale yellow linen sheath with a matching cashmere sweater. It was probably too nice for touring, but she hoped Matt would like it.

"Maybe you should do something to encourage him," Gayle suggested. "Does he have any idea that you care about him?"

Paula recalled their kiss in Matt's car after Gayle's dinner party. If he didn't realize that she was attracted to him after that, how would he ever guess? Or was he, like Tony, so accustomed to kissing women that it meant nothing?

"You're blushing," Gayle said. "I just hope you didn't actually say that you love him."

"It was nothing so rash as that . . . or roller skating past his house.

This time, he took all of the initia —" Her voice cracked and tears sprang to her eyes.

Gayle looked heartsick. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pried."

"Oh, Gayle, I promised myself this would never happen to me again!" Aware of the busboy approaching behind her, she blinked away the tears and watched him pour steaming dark coffee. When he stepped over to serve Gayle, she turned away from the compassion in her friend's green eyes.

After he left, Gayle said, "You're going to have to fight for Matt."

"But why should I? Did you have to fight for Josh?"

Gayle shook her head. "No, but I would have if I had to."

"You?"

"There are lots of ways to do battle."

"At the moment, I'm not sure Matt or any other man is worth a battle," Paula returned, feeling fractious. "Why should I have to contend for him? Why shouldn't he fight for me?"

"I'm not sure whether I prefer you sad or mad," Gayle said with a conciliatory laugh.

Seconds later, when Matt and Josh walked into the courtyard dining room, Paula struggled with her doubts. Why did he always look as if he'd been created precisely for her?

While Josh planted a kiss on Gayle's forehead, Matt smiled at Paula. "Good morning, sunshine," he said with an appreciative glance at her yellow dress. "You look beautiful here in the garden."

"You too," she replied. If he was going to act as if his moonlit ride should mean nothing to her, she would pretend that it didn't.

"Me, beautiful?" He chuckled and sat down beside her. "You must not have slept well!"

She hadn't slept well at all, agonizing over him and Vanessa, but she certainly was not going to admit that.

Moments later, their waiter presented the menus, and Paula was relieved to turn her attention toward ordering breakfast.

After they had ordered, Matt glanced at her spiral notebook. "I'm all set to play photographer for your articles."

"You're not serious," Paula replied, unconvinced.

"But I am," Matt protested. "I've always hoped that I could travel after selling the company, but I know I'll have to do something besides bask in the sun. I'd like to try more photography."

"You're a workaholic," Josh interjected.

Matt nodded. "Maybe. At any rate, I've been thinking about putting together a photography book — one of those coffee table tomes that rarely makes a photographer any money. I'd slant it for the various businesses of the world — banks, retailers, builders. It would be pictures of their counterparts around the world throughout history."

Josh shot a penetrating look at his friend. "Sounds like a tax write-off."

"I hadn't intended it that way at all," Matt objected. "It's a unique way of looking at the world, being the eye behind a camera. You see life from a different perspective."

"I'll be darned!" Josh exclaimed mildly. "And I felt I knew so much about you."

"There's a lot that you don't know," Matt replied mysteriously.

And what was that supposed to mean? Paula wondered. She turned to watch the waiter serve their fruit plates with slices of orange, papaya, melon, and pineapple.

Over breakfast she and Matt discussed how they might capture the kind of people-oriented photos Tom Timmons had suggested for the *Times* series.

"What's the basic article slant?" Matt inquired. "That's the first question Tom always demanded I ask."

Paula thumbed reluctantly through the pages in her notebook. She would have to show him her tentative opening. What if he considered it inept or entirely stupid? Finally she found it. "Here's the lead. According to the tip sheet, it's supposed to be simple, but all-encompassing, and it's supposed to establish a mood."

She scanned it nervously as he read.

> *Ancient ruins of the Mayan civilization . . . sixteenth-century Merida . . . thatch-roofed villages of the contemporary Maya . . . ultra-modern Cancun with its turquoise sea and white sandy beaches . . .*
>
> *Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, the thumblike protrusion that juts between the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea, is a place of amazing contrasts wrought through the ages. It is nearly impossible not to be intrigued by all of them, whether ancient, colonial, primitive or computer-aged.*

While he reread it, she picked at her *huevos con chorizo* — scrambled eggs with tomato *salsa* and bits of spicy sausage piled on a corn tortilla.

"A good opening," he said, looking impressed. "I know they're the hardest part of articles."

"Thanks," she responded with relief. "They certainly are for me."

He placed the notebook on the table between them and lifted his coffee cup in a toast. "We're a team!"

"A team," Paula responded with a smile, touching her cup against his. If their relationship amounted to nothing else, at least they would be a working team for the next two weeks.

"How on earth could you use photography from a trip like this for a

business project?" Josh asked Matt.

"Simple. Look at this dining room, for instance. It's not just the tree in the middle and the plants that make it unique, it's the Mayan maître d', the Mayan waiters and busboys. They're not only distinctively handsome with those hawk noses, but there's a great dignity about them, an innate courtesy," Matt explained. "Anyone in the hotel business would enjoy pictures capturing those vanishing qualities, merely as a matter of interest if nothing else."

"But which businesses, if any, would want to see Mayan ruins?" Paula asked.

"Architects . . . developers . . . real estate people. Not only the design of the structures, but how such great pyramids were built without the use of the wheel. And they'd want to know how the ancient Mayans coexisted in their cities."

"I see." Paula mulled over other possibilities. "I suppose that even Beverly Hills shop owners might be intrigued or at least amused to see how the contemporary Mayans sell their wares at outdoor markets."

Matt nodded. "Exactly. Maybe I could do a whole series of books for different professions. The more I think about it, the more I see that a project like this would involve a good bit of writing. I suppose I'm going to need a collaborator."

"You're full of surprises," Gayle said to Matt. She smiled across the table at Paula as if to impress her with what a great team they'd make.

Paula sipped the strong Mexican coffee, considering the possibilities. If Matt really were financially set for life, he could travel all over the world taking pictures for photography books. And, given his business acumen, he'd probably make money on them too. It sounded like a wonderful idea. How she'd love to be a part of it.

Her eyes wandered absently around the dining room, then stopped. At a table just beyond a group of potted palms, Vanessa was watching them intently.

Minutes before nine o'clock Paula stepped out into the morning sunshine in front of the hotel. All around the marble entry, vendors in neat white shirts sold straw hats, white blouses with colorfully embroidered flowers, conch shell and coral jewelry, sisal hemp hammocks, and other wares.

"Straw hat, señorita?" one of the vendors inquired.

"Not now, gracias. Maybe tomorrow when we visit the ruins."

She looked over the busy street scene for her first travel article, which would include Merida and the nearby Mayan ruins. Matt was already taking pictures of vendors and their wares by the hotel across the narrow street.

Above, the sky was a cerulean blue, entirely smogless, despite the cars hurtling by. In the distance the cathedral bell tolled, and she

recalled the line by John Donne: Never send to know for whom the tell tolls; it tolls for thee. There was a holiness to the tolling that lent wonder to the magnificent Sunday morning. She recalled an old saying about the tolling of church bells being echoes of God's voice.

"Over here!" Gayle called out, and Paula hurried to join the Santa Rosita group being herded onto a tour bus.

"Buenos dias," Jacob, their guide, said as he helped her into the bus.

"Buenos dias!" From the front of the bus, she saw that Evan Walker was seated with his group of friends; five had come from the computer company where he worked.

"Ready for some excitement?" Evan asked as she made her way down the aisle.

"I'm ready!" she replied enthusiastically. She was uncertain about saving a seat for Matt; Gayle and Josh took seats across the aisle. When Matt climbed on the bus, he paused to look about; spotting them, he headed for the seat beside her. Was it because she was with Josh and Gayle? Paula wondered. She looked for Vanessa and her mother, then saw them coming out of the hotel. Vanessa wore a black-and-white harlequin print pants ensemble that looked straight out of *Vogue,* and her mother was equally fashionable in an orange silk pants ensemble.

On the bus Vanessa removed her huge dark glasses and slid them atop her upswept black hair with practiced elegance. She appeared annoyed that the only seats remaining were in the back, but produced a smile as she passed Matt. "Good morning," she murmured, her eyes dancing with amusement.

"Good morning, Vanessa," he answered in an even tone. His smile seemed friendly, nothing else.

Mrs. Perotta trailed behind, her upswept black hair an exact copy of Vanessa's. Mother and daughter looked uncannily alike except that the older woman's neck was so wrinkled in contrast to her unlined face that it was apparent she'd had a facelift. Still, she was a striking beauty and had probably attracted many a man during her cocktail waitress days.

"Mrs. Perotta," Matt said with a polite nod.

"Good morning, Matt," she replied coolly as she swept past.

What had taken place between Vanessa and Matt on that calesa ride last night? Paula wondered once again.

The bus door flapped shut and Jacob manned the microphone with the air of a seasoned guide. "Today we will tour Merida," he said as the bus took off. "We begin at the Museum of Anthropology. There you will learn something of the Yucatan and the Mayan people."

Pencil and notebook in hand, Paula watched out the window, noting the narrow one-way streets. Steeples and spires rose over the many parks, and worshipers converged on the churches for the Sunday services.

Within minutes the bus was parked on the elegant Paseo de Montejo, a broad tree-lined avenue. "Here we have the grand mansions of Merida from the days when the city had more millionaires per capita than anywhere else in recent history. In the 1920s and 1930s, this was the sisal hemp capital of the world, and, before that, fortunes were made by exporting dyewood and chicle. If you will step out . . ."

The ornate white Italian Renaissance mansion converted into a museum was surrounded by an elaborate black iron fence wrought by Italian artisans. White Carrara marble lined the front steps.

"Looks like an Italian palazzo," Matt said, snapping picture after picture. "I certainly didn't expect this here."

Behind them, Vanessa and her mother agreed. Mrs. Perotta added rather loudly, "We made a grand tour of Europe the summer Vanessa graduated from high school, you know."

The year Sal Starke had married Joe Perotta — bar owner, bookie, and associate of major crime figures, Paula recalled. Everyone at school had discussed Vanessa's transformation from a cocktail waitress's daughter to a young woman bound for Europe and then for an exclusive Eastern college.

Inside the beautiful museum, spacious rooms with marble floors and crystal chandeliers housed Mayan artifacts from archeological sites. Paula took notes from the maps and charts explaining the region's geography and history.

There were Mayan pots, hatchets, ceramic vases, jewelry, masks, and other artifacts as well as a stone monolith of Chac-Mool, who received human heart sacrifices from live victims for the gods. Among the displays were skulls with drops of jade inlaid in their teeth as well as the wooden apparatus used to flatten heads to prepare them for the gods.

"Deformities such as crossed eyes were revered, and self-mutilation was common," Jacob explained. "Deformed people often became priests. In fact, some Mayans still have good teeth removed and inlaid with gold or jade."

"Ouch," Paula whispered, and Matt agreed as they made their way through the spacious rooms. Suddenly she realized gratefully that her mind had strayed from Tony for quite some time!

"Why all the note-taking, Paula?" Evan Walker asked as they paused by a display of Mayan jewelry.

"We're doing . . . that is, I'm writing some travel articles for the *Santa Rosita Times.*"

"Are you?" He looked impressed, then added upon reflection, "You're just the one to make it interesting. You and Gayle have always been so adventurous and . . . enthusiastic."

"Well, thanks," Paula said, noticing Matt taking in the conversation as they moved along.

"I'll look forward to reading the articles," Evan said.

"*If* I can bring them off," Paula replied. "But you were editor of the school paper. You don't suppose I can get you to proofread them?"

He nodded. "My pleasure."

She was thankful that Evan looked better than might have been expected so soon after a divorce.

Later, outside the museum, the Santa Rosita group strolled through the warm morning sunshine to their tour bus. The driver had parked it in the shade of towering trees and, inside, the bus was pleasantly cool.

They drove along slowly on Paseo de Montejo, admiring the many white and pastel mansions dating from the turn of the century. Vanessa and her mother, who'd usurped the seat behind them, kept up a running commentary on how the mansions reminded them of chateaus and villas in France and Italy.

Paula scribbled notes as they rode along. The bus stopped occasionally at spectacular estates so that Matt and others could dash out to take pictures. Palms, laurels, and tamarinds surrounded the lavish houses, and some had avocado, papaya, and mango trees as well. Many of the magnificent mansions were unfortunately covered with moss, mold, and mildew from the tropical climate. According to Jacob, high taxation, the decline of sisal hemp exports, and the lack of willing servants were bringing the owners as well as their houses to ruin.

At the end of Paseo de Montejo the bus stopped beside a new monument to Mexico, an astounding pink stone structure in which the history of the country was carved. Jacob, a transplant from Mexico City, dubbed its style "convoluted Mayan, furious Toltec, and subway modern."

When Matt climbed out with others to take pictures, Vanessa leaned over the seat toward Paula. "Whatever are you taking so many notes for?" she asked.

"Matt and I are doing some articles for the *Santa Rosita Times,*" Paula replied.

"Oh, really? And how did you work that?"

"We were asked."

"I see," Vanessa said, sitting back again.

"I'd like to approve any pictures you publish of me," Mrs. Perotta said.

"It's for the travel page," Paula explained. "Tom Timmons doesn't want pictures of us."

"Oh. Well, it will be interesting to read."

The article had better be accurate, Paula thought. Everyone would certainly let Tom Timmons know if she made any errors.

Later they stopped at a clothing factory where the Yucatec national costumes were sold. For women, there were *huipils* — white cotton

shifts with short sleeves and bands of colorful embroidery around necklines, sleeves, and hems — to be worn over longer garments with lace hems; for men, white *guayaberas* — loose fitting, pleated shirts.

"Did you find something to buy?" Matt asked her when they met again in the line waiting for their purchases.

His eyes were so disconcerting that it took her a moment before she held up a white cotton blouse with red and green embroidered flowers and parrots. "I didn't think I'd have use for a huipil," she said, although the darkly beautiful saleswomen looked lovely in them. "How about you?"

He displayed two bright white guayaberas. "One for my father, one for me." He chuckled. "I don't know if he'll wear his."

"Maybe I should buy one for my father too. But there's no time now."

"We can shop this afternoon," he suggested.

Did that mean he wanted to spend their free afternoon with her? Or did he just think that they should stay together to coordinate the article and photos?

Vanessa and Mrs. Perotta joined the line of tourists buying clothing and macrame purses, their arms full of hand-embroidered caftans. "I find them perfect for entertaining," Mrs. Perotta commented.

When everyone boarded the bus again, they drove through the less elegant streets of Merida. Even the modest houses were interesting with their balconies for serenades, and Matt snapped photos at every stop. Occasionally there were thatch-roofed houses among the other buildings, and pink and red hibiscus bloomed everywhere. Here and there windmills turned in the breeze over the rooflines, reminders of when Merida was called "the city of windmills."

As the bus approached their hotel and the Plaza de la Independencia, Jacob explained the need for a city gate in the mid-1500s. "Our Spanish conquerors were not popular," he said. "All of the churches built by them had catacombs leading to the cathedral, which was built like a fortress for safety. They were, after all, surrounded by Mayans."

"A sad situation for everyone," Matt said.

Paula cast a curious look at him, and his deep blue eyes held hers for an instant. Unnerved, she glanced away. She suspected that his thoughts hadn't been on the Spaniards' being surrounded by Mayans.

When they disembarked from the bus in front of their hotel, Josh said, "Why don't the two of you join us for lunch? Jacob recommended a restaurant just off the *zocalo.*"

"Are we invited?" Vanessa asked, joining them with her mother. Evan Walker was just behind them too.

"Of course," Josh replied. "The more, the merrier."

Gayle and Josh led the way toward the plaza, and Paula found both

Matt and Evan falling into step with her on the crowded sidewalk. Vanessa and her mother trailed behind them.

Wandering past the seventeenth-century university, they glimpsed an inner patio shaded by tiers of Moorish arches. Farther down the block, they browsed in shops where colorful clothing and other tourist wares hung out over the sidewalk.

"We need some pictures across the street," Matt said, nodding toward a lovely old stone church.

Paula thumbed through her guidebook and found a picture of it. "Church of Jesus," she read. "Built in the 1600s."

Nearby in the parklike setting was a graceful marble sculpture of a young mother lightly embracing a child; together, they gazed lovingly at the baby on the mother's lap. The sculptor had captured their tender love so wondrously that the sunshine streaming through the trees seemed to radiate instead from the family. *"Maternidad,"* Paula read. "Motherhood."

"A much over-rated state," Vanessa's mother said archly.

Vanessa made no comment, but Gayle said, "Not to me."

"Nor to me," Paula added, then saw both Matt and Evan glance at her. She supposed she should have kept her mouth shut. Evan's marriage had been disastrous, and a man like Matt, who hadn't married by the age of thirty and who wanted to travel the world to create photography books, would not care to be tied down with a family.

She trailed behind Gayle to a side door of the old stone church. Near the door she heard guitar music — a song of praise so sweet that it touched her heart. She stepped into the cool dark church with Gayle, and the music wafted through the arched sanctuary. Sunlight streamed through stained-glass windows, the colors diffusing on the arches and soaring pillars. After a while, the congregation rose and sang in Spanish.

Paula understood occasional phrases: Bless the Lord, O my soul. . . . Lord my God, thou art great. . . . Thou art clothed with honor and majesty. . . . What was there about faith that she never quite understood?

When they stepped back out into the sunshine, Matt was snapping pictures of a darkly beautiful girl in her white embroidered huipil; she carried a bag of groceries in each hand and balanced a round tray of onions on her head. Behind her, a plump mother, also garbed in her huipil, carried plastic buckets of groceries in each hand and a huge basket of fresh fruit on her head.

The Plaza de la Independencia was beginning to look familiar after they had seen it on the bus in the morning as well as last night when its Spanish colonial buildings had been flooded with light against the dark sky.

Paula looked up at the great twin-spired cathedral. "The guidebook claims it's the oldest cathedral in Mexico. According to local legend, the cathedral should originally have been built in Lima. The plans for a small cathedral for Merida were supposedly mixed up with Lima's en route from Spain, leaving Merida with the larger church."

"I expect there are lots of interesting stories about churches' beginnings," Matt said. "That might make another good book."

Vanessa raised an eyebrow. "You'd be bored to death with that in no time."

"Maybe so," Matt replied amiably.

Paula hoped he was only being agreeable. She couldn't imagine him a member of the jet set.

Later, as they stepped into the cathedral, she was arrested by not only its size but the stark appearance of the altars.

Vanessa remarked, "I suppose it was sacked like the rest of the churches during the revolution. And, this being Mexico and the land of mañana, they've never restored the vanished furbelows."

"But look at that," Paula said, impressed by the large panoramic painting on the wall. According to her guidebook, it depicted a formal call paid on the Spanish conquistador Montejo by the Mayan king of Mani soon after the founding of Merida. At Matt's request she read, "Two months after this call, Tutul Xiu — the most powerful chieftain of the Maya — was converted and baptized Melchor. And he was instrumental in keeping uprisings to a minimum."

"A traitor," Evan remarked.

"It sounds as if he were taken in," Paula said.

"Maybe he was sick of a god who demanded living sacrifices," Josh countered. "I didn't especially like that Chac-Mool statue at the museum. They put live, still-beating hearts in that plate he holds."

Gayle shook her head at all of them. "Maybe Tutul Xiu — Melchor — encountered the Lord."

No one replied.

What precisely did encountering the Lord mean? Paula wondered as she stepped away from the painting. She watched the worshipers coming and going throughout the cathedral. Did encountering God mean to have a vision? To somehow hear His voice? What was the difference between scoffers and those who believed so devoutly?

As the group left the cathedral, she saw that Gayle was praying. In the vestibule, Paula was strangely moved by the begging cripples and gave all of her coins to them.

Wandering across the street to the plaza with the group, she admired the flowers and hedges as well as the attractive Meridans sitting on beautiful wrought iron benches. Others strolled along the spacious curving sidewalks.

"My turn to take your picture," Josh said to Matt. He directed him and Paula to sit in a white *confidenciale,* an S-curved Victorian loveseat. "And if this one gets published, I earn the ten dollars."

Matt laughed as he pulled Paula along to one of the curious concrete seats that looked perfect for quiet and eminently respectable tête-à-têtes. Sitting down, they faced each other, yet were sitting side by side with the S-curve of the loveseat separating them.

Overhead, scattered shafts of sunlight gleamed through the branches and leaves of the sprawling Indian laurel tree, and birds twittered, but she was scarcely aware of them. She saw nothing but Matt's sun-burnished hair, the confident tilt of his square chin, and the blueness of his eyes.

"A little closer," Josh said, looking at them through the camera. "Now how about kissing her, Matt? Only for the picture, of course. I'm sure the *Santa Rosita Times* would like that! A little extra for their money!"

"Men!" Paula said with an embarrassed laugh.

Matt grinned at Josh. "You're embarrassing Paula."

She smiled for the camera, but her back stiffened with resistance as Matt leaned toward her.

"It's not that I don't want to," he whispered, "but I prefer to choose the place and the moment myself."

Her heart skipped as he rested his hand lightly on hers, then there was the click of the camera, and everyone was chattering.

"Will you join me in a carriage ride after lunch?" Matt asked.

Looking into his eyes, she could not resist. "Yes, Matt," she replied, though an inner voice warned against it.

"You're blushing," he murmured.

"It must be the sun," she answered, laughing. She refused to spoil the moment by looking at the others, nor did she care what they thought.

5

Arriving at the restaurant, Paula was surprised that its atmosphere wasn't rustic. The main dining room exuded richness with its white stucco walls, great curved arches and beautifully carved dark woodwork around the French doors and tall windows. Crystal chandeliers hung from the high ceiling, and oil paintings on the walls gave emphasis to the continental atmosphere. Well-dressed Meridans dined at tables appointed with damask tablecloths, fine china, and shimmering goblets.

Matt looked impressed as they awaited the maître d'. "Except for the arches, it's quite Parisian."

Gayle said, "I've never before seen 'oriental carpets' made of tile!"

"No moths," Josh quipped.

"And probably no haute cuisine," Vanessa commented.

Paula wished that everyone didn't sound so knowledgeable about Paris, oriental rugs, and haute cuisine.

The maître d' arrived and offered them a choice of the air-conditioned indoor elegance or casual courtyard dining under the trees.

"I cast a vote for outside," Gayle said, and everyone agreed except Mrs. Perotta, who finally acquiesced *if* she could have a chair in the shade. It occurred to Paula that Tony would have opted for indoors too; he'd always found elegance terribly important. Now why was she thinking about him? She chided herself as they made their way through the courtyard. She was supposed to be forgetting him.

A white-suited waiter, napkin folded over his arm, seated them at a round table among Moorish arches, black wrought-iron gates, and potted palms. Paula noticed as Matt held the chair for her that Evan was hurrying around to sit on her other side.

Evan smiled warmly. "May I sit beside you?"

"Of course," she replied, aware that Matt was taking note. "Have you two been introduced?"

"Not really," Evan answered.

She nervously performed the introductions, then found herself adding, "Evan and I are old friends."

"So I presumed," Matt said in a curious tone of voice.

Was he jealous? Paula wondered. If that wouldn't be an odd turn of events!

She shifted her attention to the huge embossed menus presented to them. "I can't believe these selections," she remarked to divert their attention. "Garlic soup . . . lime soup . . . tortilla soup . . ."

Gayle said, "For the entrée we're supposed to try *Pibil* chicken. It's baked in banana leaves, as is the pork. They're Yucatan specialties."

"I'll stick with the lobster," Mrs. Perotta stated. Though seated in the shade, she had lowered the brim of her black straw hat so no errant ray of sunshine might possibly touch her face.

Josh chuckled. "I'm looking forward to the mango mousse."

Everyone checked the menus. Mango mousse and carioca crepes were indeed listed among the more mundane desserts.

Amid the good-natured chatter, Paula felt her tensions slowly dissolve. She was not going to think about Tony, nor was she prepared to be a bone of contention between Matt and Evan — she was going to sit back and enjoy the dinner.

A balmy breeze stirred the leaves in the overhead tree, and soft Spanish music floated through the courtyard. Several parties of American tourists sat at distant tables, but many diners chatted in Spanish, German and French, and the dignified waiters moved quickly about the tables.

"Pleasant, isn't it?" Matt mused aloud.

"It looks like a scene from a travel poster," Paula responded, and they sat quietly sharing the sight. "The kind of picture to store away in our memories."

"Just what I was thinking," Evan said.

Paula turned a bright smile on him. She'd almost forgotten he was there and suspected he'd sensed it. As she recalled his recent divorce, her heart welled with sympathy, and she turned her attention to him.

The waiters served dinner with dignity, and everyone seemed pleased with the food as well as the restaurant's ambience. Paula's *Pibil* pork — chunks of lean pork cooked in banana leaves and seasoned with an unfamiliar red spice — was delectable. Pickled red onion slices, tasting unusually sweet, and thick, wonderfully flavored black beans were equally interesting.

"Another tortilla?" Matt offered, passing the lidded basket of warm corn tortillas around again.

"Just one more," she said. "I've never had any so delicious. I'm going to have to walk off lunch —"

"Don't forget the calesa ride."

She flushed. "I haven't."

"I hope not," he responded with pleasure.

Nonplused by a flurry of emotions, she turned to pass the tortilla

basket to Evan. She was appalled to see the waiter serving him another bottle of Mexican beer — Evan's third or fourth. "Don't you think that's too much . . .," she began.

Evan had been speaking to the waiter. "Did you say something, Paula?"

"Another . . . another tortilla?" She had no right to criticize him just because she didn't care for alcoholic beverages, she decided. Her grandfather had been an alcoholic, and she and her parents had not cared to discover whether they'd inherited the tendency.

"Yes, thanks," Evan replied. He fumbled to extract a tortilla from the basket, then extolled the virtues of dinner and what they'd seen of Merida.

Paula nodded politely, aware of Matt's interest in her conversation with Evan.

Vanessa had been strangely quiet during the general table conversation, but when they sat back to await dessert, she engaged Matt in a quietly intense conversation. "It wasn't really my fault!" she insisted with annoyance, then looked petulant.

What wasn't her fault? Paula wondered. Something about the calesa ride last night, or about marrying Kurt Packard years ago? Everyone had thought then that Vanessa's jet set husband was quite a catch. Perhaps he'd become bored with her as he had with several prior wives.

Paula turned toward Evan, searching for something to say.

"You're very beautiful, Paula," he said with passion. "Far more beautiful than when we were in school."

"Why, thank you. . . ." The smell of beer on his breath was repulsive, and the tone of his voice reminded her of the way Tony used to compliment her. "No braces now!" she quickly added with a laugh.

He ignored her attempt at humor. "I was a fool not to pursue you harder, but when I went to college, you were just a junior in high school and you seemed like a kid. I thought I wanted a more . . . you know, a more sophisticated girlfriend. That kind of girl was exciting to me then." He looked embarrassed and grabbed a deep breath. "Well, you know what happened, I suppose."

"I'm sorry, Evan."

"We had a great time at first, but she never wanted to stop partying, even when we were married. Every day was supposed to be fun, fun, fun, and she started hanging around bars —"

"You don't have to tell me, Evan."

He shrugged. "I guess I just wanted to apologize for not seeing how wonderful you'd turn out."

She patted his arm. "Thank you, but I'm not so wonderful. And you don't have to apologize for anything. We had some nice times together

when we were teenagers. We were far too young to be serious."

"And now . . .?" He cast a meaningful glance at Matt.

She was unsure of how to answer and finally said, "Matt and I are old friends too."

She wished that she knew what Matt and Vanessa were discussing so seriously.

Matt joined her at the rear of the group when they left the restaurant. "Who's just old friends?" he asked.

Paula blushed again. "Were you eavesdropping, Matt Montgomery?"

He grinned. "Listening is more like it."

"What should I have told Evan — that you'd been my babysitter?"

"That makes me sound ancient."

"What then?"

His eyes danced with mischief. "You should have said that we're *very* good friends."

"Oh, Matt!"

"Oh, Paula!" he mocked, and they both laughed.

Strange, she thought, sometimes she was nearly tongue-tied around him, yet other times there was this feeling of camaraderie.

Looking down the street at the others, she noticed Vanessa's glare. If only she hadn't come along! This relatively inexpensive tour didn't strike her as the type of traveling Vanessa would favor unless — as Gayle had suggested — she were after Matt again.

Ahead of them, the others stood waiting on the busy street corner for a traffic light to change.

"Let's lose them!" Matt whispered. He grabbed her hand and hurried her across the other street.

They were rushing down the sidewalk when Josh yelled, "Hey, where are you two going?"

"See you later!" Matt called back.

"I didn't realize how full of mischief you are," Paula laughed.

"Only because I was too serious for so many years. Eagle Scout and all. You should know."

"And you're not now?"

"I'm never serious on vacation!"

As they slowed their steps, she was all too aware that he still had her hand. She tried to slip it away, but he pulled it to his lips, kissing her fingertips.

Paula's muscles became fluid; she managed a wry tone. "Just what are you doing, Matt Montgomery?"

"If you don't know . . ." He chuckled. "Certainly you've had your hand kissed before. As I recall, you've been most thoroughly kissed!"

She darted him an embarrassed look. Being so thoroughly kissed by him was part of the trouble, she thought, though she didn't attempt to wrest her hand away again. It felt all too wonderful to hold hands with him; she would have to keep up a light banter and remember that none of this was significant. He'd said himself — perhaps not simply in jest — he wasn't serious while on vacation.

When they reached the edge of the Plaza de la Independencia, he waved for one of the calesas lined up along the street. "Look at that, they've kept the best horse for us!"

"You're right. Some look like they've seen far better days." At least the lively bay pulling the high-wheeled carriage wouldn't make her feel guilty about its plight.

"Buenas tardes," the elderly driver said with a tip of his faded straw hat. He exchanged a few words of English with Matt, making arrangements for the drive through the city.

As the driver helped her up the steps of the shiny black cab, she noted his handsome hawk nose. "Mayan?" she asked.

"Sí," he said proudly. "Maya."

Moments later, she and Matt were seated in the cab's black enclosure and the driver lightly touched the bay's flanks with a length of sisal rope tied to a stick. The horse started off and clippity-clopped down the street in the midst of the light afternoon traffic.

Sitting back, Matt cast a speculative look at her, then slipped his arm around the back of their seat, his fingers cupping her shoulder.

An almost imperceptible shiver fluttered through her. Swallowing hard, she looked out at the city, uncertain of what to do. Surely she'd given away her feelings earlier by allowing him to hold her hand — or he wouldn't have chanced this move.

"I feel as if I've known you forever, yet don't know you," he said. "Do you have the same feeling?"

She nodded, too disconcerted by his nearness to speak. She looked blindly out at the Spanish colonial buildings surrounding the tree-shaded zocalo.

After a while he said, "This is the best way to see a city."

She glanced at him and realized that despite his confident bearing, he was feeling unnerved too. She finally said, "You look like an emperor out surveying his realm."

"I don't know that I'd care for that title. The emperor of Mexico didn't last too long." He took her hand in his. "I think I'd rather be a conquistador!"

She returned his smile uneasily, not certain of his play on words. Suddenly she had the impression that they were being observed. Looking aside, she saw their luncheon group strolling along on the sidewalk. Vanessa's face was rigid with fury.

"We're being watched," Matt said.

"They're going to talk," Paula responded. She tried to extract her hand from his, but he gripped her more firmly and she could hardly put up a struggle with the others watching. To her relief, the horse pulled the calesa into a left turn with the traffic, concealing them behind the carriage's black enclosure.

For a while neither of them spoke. They gazed out at the passing city scene, though Paula felt such a flurry of emotions that she scarcely saw anything.

Matt asked, "Does it matter to you what they might say?"

"In a way . . ." For one thing, she didn't want to be thought a fool; for another, there'd just been Tony.

"Is that why you ran off the night of Dr. Zayere's talk?" Matt asked. "You worried what they'd say?"

"No." How could she possibly say that she'd run because of her certainty he'd prefer Vanessa to her? That all of the years she'd yearned for him, he'd always preferred Vanessa? That she didn't really trust men anymore?

He caught up her hand in his and kissed her fingertips again. "Paula . . ." His blue eyes brimmed with warmth, and he turned her to him, drawing her close so slowly and gently that it afforded her every opportunity to resist.

Trembling against him, she whispered, "Oh, Matt!" Her mouth reached for his. The bare brushing of their lips was cataclysmic, and she shuddered with happiness. As their kiss intensified, she felt a curious sense of old lovers becoming reunited. Matt, oh, Matt! her heart cried out again and again.

When they finally moved apart, he whispered, "Why did it take me so long to find you?"

"I was always there." Her arms circled his neck, her fingers were in his golden hair as she had so often dreamed.

"Paula," he murmured as his lips sought hers again and again. After a while he said, "We'd better catch our breath!"

Her emotions still swirling, she nodded and rested her head against the seat, listening to her heart race. When she opened her eyes, she found him watching her.

"This is the last thing that I expected on this trip," he said. "I hope you don't think . . ." He shook his head. "Here, let me hold your hand, Paula; that seems safe enough."

She said nothing, only looking at him and offering her hand. She didn't want to talk or to think or to worry, only to live in this moment's radiance. Surely he loved her. Surely he must.

They sat hand in hand as the calesa moved through the street, then down the tree-lined Paseo de Montejo, where they'd ridden in the

morning on the bus, past the great pink monument, then back around the corner by the Museum of Anthropology. Thank goodness she'd taken notes earlier, for she wouldn't be able to now.

Far too soon their ride was over, and they returned to the Plaza de la Independencia. Matt helped her down from the calesa, and she looked about to see if Vanessa and the others were nearby. There were only Meridans and other tourists.

The driver nodded pleasantly at them as he drove away, and she wondered how many loveswept couples he'd carried behind him in his lifetime.

"What would you like to do for the rest of the afternoon?" Matt asked.

Take another carriage ride, she was tempted to say, but she resisted. "Sit in the zocalo for a while," she answered instead. "I need to work on my notes . . . to describe the park and the buildings, to get the feel of the city and the people."

"And I need more pictures," he said. Readying his camera, he noticed a group of Mayan women walking by in their white huipils, and he snapped pictures of them. Other Meridan women in Western dress strolled by with their families. "They're supposed to be the most beautiful women in Mexico," he remarked.

She felt a ridiculous stab of jealousy. It was bad enough that he attracted women with his good looks — glances by the dark-eyed beauties made it clear they found the tall, blue-eyed, blond American appealing — she didn't have to make it worse by being jealous. Being with Matt would always be like this.

The afternoon slipped by, and suddenly the sun's rays slanted low through the plaza's trees. Returning to the hotel, they stopped at the colorful shops, and she bought a white guayabera shirt for her father and hand-embroidered caftans — a pink one for her mother, a blue for herself. Matt purchased an antique churchyard bell. "For my house or condo or whatever," he said. "It looks like just the thing for over a patio gate."

He didn't seem like a man with nesting instincts, Paula thought, but then his interest in photography had surprised her too.

As they approached their hotel, he slipped an arm around her shoulders and gave her a fast squeeze. "It's been a wonderful afternoon for me, Paula."

She smiled at him, her heart reaching up beyond her eyes as she remembered their kisses and now their comfortable companionship. "For me too."

He dropped a kiss on her hair. "How about tonight? Do you want to go to the mariachi restaurant?"

"I'd love to. All you have to say is mariachi music, and I'm ready

to go."

His hotel room was just down the hallway from hers and, as he dropped her off, he glanced briefly around. "There's no one," he murmured and tilted her chin up to him. His mouth, warm and exciting, touched her forehead, her eyelids, the tip of her nose, until his lips found her mouth in a kiss that sent tremors racing through her again.

For a second, a treacherous second, she hesitated, not really wanting to resist, but knew that she must. "Matt!" she demurred softly, pulling away.

He stepped back. "Six-thirty?" he asked. "That should give us time to clean up and change."

"Six-thirty," she agreed. She unlocked her door and, smiling at him, finally closed it behind her. Inside the room, she leaned back against the door, her eyes closed. How could all of this be happening when she had been so determined not to fall in love again? And how could she *not* love Matt now, when she had for so many years!

"Did you and Matt have a nice afternoon?" Gayle asked as she and Paula finished dressing for the evening.

"Yes, very nice," Paula responded, busying herself inordinately with pulling on her navy blue high-heeled sandals. She hoped that Gayle wouldn't pursue the subject, and fortunately she didn't.

Paula stood up, the silk of her royal blue dress smooth under her fingers as she stepped to the mirror. Not only did the royal blue color of the shirtwaist dress enhance the blue-green of her eyes, but her entire face seemed aglow with happiness. Her honey-blond hair was parted on the side, the bangs brushed off her face, and casual waves curved almost to her shoulders. For once, she looked exactly as she wanted to.

Moments later Matt and Josh knocked at the door. "We have over an hour," Matt said. "The reservations are for eight o'clock at the restaurant."

How marvelous he looks in his light tan resort suit, Paula thought. She grabbed her navy clutch bag from the bed. "Maybe we can sit in the plaza and listen to the music. There are band concerts on Sunday nights."

"Sounds like a good idea," Matt said. "Even without music, it's one of the most interesting plazas I've seen anywhere."

"I'm thirsty," Gayle remarked on the way downstairs, and they decided to stop first at the hotel's refreshment bar out on the marble terrace.

"Isn't this lovely?" Paula asked as Matt seated her at a table near the white balustrade. The terrace overlooked an extensive walled garden in which water trickled over an elegant fountain; purple bougainvillaea spilled over the trellised walls. In the distance, an artist sketched the

sprawling hotel's graceful arches.

"You're lovely," Matt said, and she knew he meant it. Perhaps she wasn't as strikingly beautiful as Vanessa, but at the moment he found her appealing; the thought gave her exquisite joy.

"Mosquitoes!" Gayle brushed one from her arm. "I think I'd rather go to the coffee shop."

"How about you, Paula?" Matt asked.

A soft breeze wafted through the balmy air and the garden was magnificent. "I prefer it here." Besides, much as she liked Gayle and Josh, she wanted to be alone with Matt.

Gayle turned a wry look on Paula.

"See you two at dinner," Josh said as he and Gayle left.

Later, when Paula and Matt sat on a park bench on the downtown plaza, Paula's legs and the back of her neck began to itch. She thought there might be mosquitoes, but she didn't see any.

"Those invisible mosquitoes must find you delicious," Matt observed. "Maybe we'd better walk."

They strolled along the crowded sidewalks hand in hand. It appeared that all of the Meridan families had dressed up for the evening and were out promenading through the plaza. There was an aura of contentment and friendliness about them, as well as a natural dignity in their attire and demeanor. By comparison, most of the passing tourists were unattractive in their skimpy clothing.

On one end of the plaza near the bandstand, workers were setting up wooden folding chairs.

"When does the music begin?" Paula asked in her imperfect Spanish.

"A las ocho," one of the men responded with a polite nod.

"Eight o'clock," she told Matt.

"We'll miss it. Too bad."

Still it was wonderful to stroll with him and to watch the young children happily chase soap bubbles through the air. Nearby a vendor sold liquid and wands for blowing bubbles. Another dealt in bright plastic balls on strings. Other vendors offered popcorn, ice cream, flat sugar candies with nuts, tortilla chips with a sauce shaken into the plastic bags. One vendor's wares perplexed them; he dispensed small packets from two large pouches hanging on either side of him, each suspended from the cloth hung over his neck. Customers crowded around, and he was always just far enough away that his wares were a mystery.

"Peanuts!" Matt said at last with a chuckle. "He's selling peanuts. Would you like some?"

"I'd love some. I'm starving."

As they sat down again to shell and eat the peanuts, she thought she felt more mosquitoes. Yet what did a few bites matter when she could

share a park bench with Matt?

When it was time to leave, schoolchildren wearing band uniforms and carrying musical instruments assembled near the bandstand. "If only we could stay for the music!" she wished.

"My sentiments exactly," Matt agreed. "If I ever do the photography books, it won't be while taking fast tours like this one. I'd probably want to spend at least a whole week on a city like Merida. There's a sense of pride and of the universality of life here, especially in this plaza."

"I know just what you mean. It's like watching the rites of passage." There were courting couples, newlyweds, pregnant women with their husbands, mothers nursing infants, fathers pushing babies in carriages, families with well-mannered children accompanying them, and beaming grandparents. How content they appeared to be!

As they departed, she reminded herself that her happiness came from being with Matt. Surely it would not have been so wonderful without him at her side.

The mariachi restaurant was only a few blocks past their hotel, and they arrived promptly at eight, meeting Gayle and Josh just inside the entrance.

"Buenas noches," the ebullient maître d' said in greeting.

They responded with a hearty "Buenas noches!"

"Santa Rosita party," Matt explained.

"Of course! You will follow me, por favor?" He led them swiftly through the dimly lit, cavernous restaurant to a large table next to the dance floor.

Vanessa, wearing a low-cut red silk dress, sat conversing with her mother and five or six others. "There you are, Matt," Vanessa exclaimed. "Do come sit with me."

Matt faltered in his stride, and Paula was so stunned at the woman's gall that she could think of nothing to say. From the corner of her eye she saw Gayle and Josh arriving just in time to take in the entire scene.

Before anyone could stop him, Josh blithely appropriated the chair next to Vanessa as if he had not overheard the interchange.

Bless him, Paula thought in relief while the maître d' seated her and Matt some distance away.

Moments later, Evan and his friends arrived at the table. "Buenas noches, señorita," he said with an accent even more atrocious than her own. "May I have the honor of sitting next to you again?"

"I don't know about the *honor,*" she responded with a laugh, "but I'd be pleased to sit with you." She hoped that he wouldn't be upset by the romantic attachment that had developed between her and Matt, particularly since their escape from the rest of them after lunch.

Others from the Santa Rosita group arrived. Finally there were

sixteen at the rectangular table, everyone sharing his or her afternoon's adventures.

"We have ringside seats," Matt remarked.

"Yes, we certainly do." Paula couldn't conceive of anything less than ringside seats after how wonderful the entire day had been. She sat enthralled with happiness. It seemed that words were unessential between them now, that she could spend a lifetime simply basking in his presence.

She looked about the mariachi restaurant. A wrought-iron railing beside them separated the capacious dining area from the lowered dance floor, and beyond there was a raised stage for the evening's entertainment.

Matt caught her hand in his. "What a wonderful day it's been."

"For me too." She remembered the bliss of being in his arms and thought he was recalling it now as well.

"A nice table," Evan Walker commented on the other side of her.

It took her a moment to respond. "Yes, it is." From the corner of her eye, she glimpsed Matt smiling at her, then the waiter presented their menus.

The selections were as tempting as those at the restaurant where they had eaten lunch. "Would you like to share portions of the entrées with me?" Matt asked.

"A wonderful idea! I've been eyeing chicken mole and hot green enchiladas and Yucatan beef tips —"

Matt gave a chuckle. "Let's have all three."

"You're joking," she protested, then noticing how low the prices were, she agreed.

The busboys brought *bolillos,* freshly baked rolls whose delicious aroma preceded them, as well as bottles of mineral water. Nearby tables in the enormous restaurant filled rapidly. The evening was so alive with chatter and laughter that it seemed only minutes before their waiter brought their green enchiladas covered with a melted cheese sauce.

"Looks marvelous," Paula said before trying her first forkful. The fiery pepper burned her tongue, yet it didn't deter her from eating more until suddenly her mouth felt afire.

Matt laughed as she wildly reached for her glass of mineral water and held the cooling liquid in her mouth. "It creeps up on you, doesn't it?"

She sent him a sidelong glance. Just like you do, she thought.

"And what did that look mean?" Matt asked.

As if he didn't know! His blue eyes were so compelling and his smile so dazzling that she knew she could never resist him.

Occasionally Evan turned to her from his friends for small talk, but he evidently noticed the magnetism between her and Matt, and was carefully polite.

They feasted on chicken mole — roasted chicken covered with a chocolate sauce, and Mexican beef tips cooked with sweet peppers and onions. Again there was a scoop of the delicious black beans. When she could eat no more, she sat back contently. Happiness surged through her as she observed Matt finish his dinner, relishing every bite. He ate with gusto and enjoyment, yet with every sign of refinement. It seemed that he did everything pleasantly.

As the waiter served coffee, busloads of tourists streamed into the restaurant, filling the enormous room to capacity. After everyone had been given a drink, the house lights dimmed.

Spirited mariachi music swirled from the darkness, then a spotlight hit the stage. Golden instrument glistening, the trumpeter led the group in the melodious strains of "Guadalahara." The silvery braid on the mariachis' short black jackets, tight charro pants, and sombreros shimmered in the light.

Although she'd often heard mariachi music, tonight it seemed especially delightful as she clapped to the exciting rhythms with the rest of the crowd. She discovered Matt watching her. "I'm so glad we've come. Aren't they wonderful?"

"You make it wonderful," he murmured, his breath warm in her hair.

Later, a troupe of dancers — three couples in brilliantly colored Mayan costumes — performed the ancient religious dances of their ancestors, worshiping the sun. The bronzed men wore little on their torsos except short skirtlike kirtles, wide collars, and high headdresses decorated with plumes. The women danced in diaphanous costumes with feathers in their hair.

"There's an ancient Egyptian feeling to it," Matt observed.

Paula laughed. "Exotic, whatever it is."

Next the troupe stamped and whirled through contemporary Mayan folk dances, the women in white embroidered huipils, the men in white muslin peon costumes. They changed costumes with lightning speed while the mariachis played. Their repertoire included everything from dignified Spanish dances to comic bullfights, ending with an exuberant Mexican hat dance around huge sombreros.

Later a marimba band of nine men wearing amusing folkloric costumes captured the audience's enthusiasm and often their laughter, especially with a comic cock fight.

"There's a childlike joy to the marimba music," Paula remarked.

Matt nodded, as caught up in the music as she. "They love playing it so much that we can't help liking it too."

Yet not everyone delighted in it. And certainly Tony would have found it childish. Suddenly it seemed impossible to imagine why she'd ever fallen in love with him. Perhaps it had been partly out of loneliness

in Phoenix.

She looked away, trying to redirect her thoughts. At her side, Evan looked only vaguely interested in the marimba band and was polishing off a third or fourth decanter of the house wine with his friends. Down the table, Vanessa looked bored. What was the difference between those who delighted in the joy of the music — and life — and those who were disinterested? The answer probably had little to do with being terribly knowledgeable about either.

When the show ended, a small orchestra played Latin dance music, and couples from the audience made their way to the floor. Paula turned to Matt, only to find Vanessa approaching him.

"Aren't you going to ask me to dance?" she inquired. "I remember we used to do a very exciting tango after taking those dancing lessons."

Paula looked away.

"Enjoying the evening?" Evan asked from the other side of Paula, his breath reeking of alcohol.

She nodded mutely. It had been wonderful until now. Evan was saying something about the gourd being used as a musical instrument. On her other side, she was aware of Matt excusing himself, rising, and walking away with Vanessa. After a while, she heard nothing of what Evan was saying, only the sensuous rhythms of "Tango of Love." She glanced toward the dance floor.

Couples moved smoothly across the floor with stylistic posturings to the exotic Latin music, capturing the audience's attention. The passion of the dance pervaded the room, quickly stilling conversation at the tables until only the sensuous music vibrated in the air. When the song neared its conclusion, dancers stopped, one couple after another, catching their breath and standing aside to admire the most sensational dancers.

Two of the couples — middle-aged and accustomed to each other's every move — were exquisite, but the most ravishing twosome on the floor was Matt and Vanessa. They exceeded Paula's worst expectations, dancing to the exaggerated rhythm with their eyes locked in passionate interchange. Vanessa was unbelievably voluptuous in her red crepe dress, and Matt, his tan suit almost white under the dim lights, held her waist in a firm grip as they executed their turns.

Everyone at the table watched them, several directing curious glances at Paula.

"Know what they're doing, don't they?" Evan asked.

Paula didn't respond, unable to take her eyes from them. They knew exactly what they were doing, Matt as much as Vanessa, and there was far more to their performance than the intricacies of the steps. It was the entanglement of their lives for years — an entangled tango of passion and lingering love. The Latin music throbbed on and on. With the

expertise of professional dancers, Matt and Vanessa moved to the precise rhythm, erect and cheek to cheek, then shifted direction with stunning precision.

The long slits in the slim skirt of Vanessa's red silk dress displayed her lovely long legs. Their gaze locked with such passion that it radiated all around them. At the music's tempestuous last notes, Matt dipped Vanessa deeply and masterfully. Vanessa's hand, at the back of Matt's neck, pulled his face down to hers and for an instant their lips met and held.

The audience and other dancers burst into applause, and Paula swung away, her eyes shut for an unendurable moment.

"Do you want me to take you back to the hotel?" Evan asked quietly.

She nodded, afraid to open her eyes for fear the tears would come. What a terrible fool she had been again!

"Let's go then," he said.

In seconds she was up and weaving through the crowded tables for the other end of the room. She wondered what Matt might think of her leaving, but when she glanced at the dance floor, he and Vanessa were dancing an encore.

"Don't run!" Evan said behind her. He caught her by the shoulder and she slowed. Whatever she did, she must not run, Paula told herself over and over. She'd already made enough of a spectacle of herself.

"He's a playboy, Paula," Evan said, opening the door for her. "People like you and me get hurt when we take playboys and playgirls too seriously."

She caught back a sob and shook her head. It wasn't as if she hadn't known better, as if she hadn't been warned about Matt! But why did the warnings have to be so painfully true?

6

The next morning Paula called room service while Gayle showered. Under no circumstances was she going to face Matt over breakfast, Paula thought in anguish. Besides her heartache about Matt's passionate tango and public kiss with Vanessa, irritating red welts from mosquito bites had risen on her arms and legs — mementos of her romantic interlude with him in the plaza. Worse, her upper lip itched as if a welt might rise there too. At the moment, the only saving grace she could think of was that Evan had been a perfect gentleman when he brought her home.

"Aren't you going downstairs for breakfast?" Gayle asked when she was dressed.

Paula, still in her blue nightgown and peignoir, shook her head. "I just can't seem to get organized this morning, so I've called room service."

Gayle raised an eyebrow at her, but said nothing.

"I'll be out for the bus in time, don't worry."

"Am I that much of a mother hen?"

"Not really," Paula admitted. "Only a caring friend."

"Thanks." Gayle's smile suddenly went awry as she looked at Paula. "I just wish Matt wasn't so wealthy and handsome!"

Paula tried to brush her hair nonchalantly. "Why do you say that?"

Gayle grabbed her purse and headed for the door. "Because then Vanessa wouldn't be interested in him!"

As the door closed, Paula sank down on her bed. What Gayle said was true. But was Matt aware of it? In any case, it was senseless to ruin the day over last night; it had been difficult enough to sleep.

Onward and forward, she finally reminded herself and stood up forlornly. She plodded to her closet and selected white culottes and a scooped-neck, cap-sleeved lavender blouse as appropriate for climbing the Mayan pyramids at Uxmal.

A knock sounded at the door. "Room service."

Paula opened the door. It was a white-uniformed bellboy with her breakfast tray, and she let him in.

As he headed for the round table and chairs by the window, there was

another knock at the still ajar door.

"Paula?"

The sound of Matt's voice caused a tremor to flutter through her. She turned, but he hadn't stepped in. "Just a minute." She quickly tipped the bellboy and went with him to the door. "Yes?" she asked.

He wore a regretful expression. "Gayle said you weren't coming down for breakfast, and I wanted to talk to you."

Paula said nothing, focusing on his pale blue shirt collar to avoid his eyes.

"About last night. I'm sorry. I know how it must have looked. . . ."

Her heart hardened. She had forgiven Tony again and again; she had decided yesterday morning at breakfast that maybe Matt's escorting Vanessa on the calesa ride meant nothing. And *now* she was to pretend that the tempestuous tango and kiss were meaningless too! "Oh Matt!" she blurted, "I didn't really believe that you were such a . . ." The word *fool* was on the tip of her tongue.

"A what?" he asked with an unreadable expression.

She bit her lower lip to stop its trembling.

People passed by in the hallway and glanced at them.

"Look — can't I come in for a minute?"

"I'm not dressed," she stated flatly.

"Paula! The bellboy was in there. . . ."

She glanced down at the blue lacy peignoir covering her nightgown.

"I promise not to touch you," Matt said.

She opened the door. "Just for a minute."

He stepped in. "Paula, I just wanted to . . ." He tried valiantly to keep his eyes on her face. "I just wanted to try to explain that Vanessa asked me to dance and she's the one who pulled my head down to kiss her when I couldn't possibly let go in that dip." He stopped, and his eyes roamed over her. He said abruptly, "Don't you ever let another man in here, bellboy or not!"

"How dare you tell me what to do!"

"Paula!" he whispered hoarsely, sweeping her into his arms.

Be careful! her mind flashed, but his mouth was suddenly warm on hers again and her strength seeped away as she began to give in to his fervent kiss. When she found her arms moving involuntarily around his neck, reason asserted itself with a vengeance, and she wrenched her lips from his. "Get out of here, Matt, go away . . .!"

He looked guilty and backed to the door.

Angrily she opened it. "There's no need for you to make excuses! But I really did trust you when I let you kiss me in the calesa. I didn't want to believe that it was a mere . . . hobby for you.

"A hobby! Where did you ever —"

"Moreover you promised not to touch me in here!" she called out

behind him, not caring who might hear. "Now go, please!" She shut the door firmly and turned away. Why hadn't he left her alone? He'd only made things immeasurably worse! It was bad enough to be so attracted to him. She wished she could cry, but her heart ached too horribly for tears.

She stood in the middle of the room in utter desolation. How could she possibly handle being with him day after day the rest of the week? It didn't seem humanly possible to cope with this situation. Worse, the trip had barely begun.

Finally she threw on her clothes. As she pulled on her white sandals, an answer began to come to her. Perhaps . . . perhaps Evan wouldn't mind helping. He would understand since he'd been so badly hurt by love too.

Making her decision, she picked up the telephone.

Paula delayed long enough to be one of the last passengers boarding the bus. When she climbed on, she immediately saw Evan. Not only had he saved her a seat as she had requested, but the front one.

"I thought you'd want to see out as well as possible for taking notes," he explained, standing up as she pressed past him to the window seat.

"Thanks." She sat down. "It's perfect."

Moments later, the driver shut the bus door and pulled out into traffic.

Jacob manned the microphone, "Buenos días," he said with his now familiar drowsy smile. "Today we will drive to the Mayan ruins of Uxmal and Kabah, but first we will stop at a local bank since many of you wish to change travelers' checks."

Paula pulled out her notebook and pencil, and looked around. Outside, the streets were jammed with cars, and on the sidewalks, housewives carried mesh bags full of tomatoes, oranges, and papayas. She forced herself to take notes.

"There we have a bread seller," Jacob said, pointing out the elderly man on a motorcycle with an enormous metal container in back. "And there is the mail carrier on his bicycle." They seemed oblivious to the roaring traffic all around them.

Within minutes, the bus parked in front of the bank, a modern marble building on the fashionable Paseo de Montejo. Paula left her notebook on the seat, and hurried out hoping to avoid Mark, wishing she'd never have to face him again.

In the bank Jacob led them to the proper line, where she and Evan quickly exchanged their travelers' checks. As they walked out, she glimpsed Matt and Vanessa together toward the end of the line. He was slightly turned away, chuckling about something. How dare he! After

acting so innocent this morning! If he didn't care for Vanessa, why was he always in her vicinity?

When Paula stepped out into the sunshine, an unshaven mail carrier — identifiable by his billed hat and the mailbag over his shoulder — was blowing a whistle to hold back traffic. Their bus backed up slightly. In front of it, a woman extracted her compact car from the tight parking space.

"What on earth?" Paula exclaimed.

"He's angling for a tip," Evan said, amused. "Just watch."

Moments later, when the woman had her car out, she presented a bill to the mail carrier, who bowed most respectfully to hide his grin.

"I have a feeling that this is *his* street," Evan chuckled.

They stood in the dappled sunshine and early morning breeze, watching the mail carrier needlessly direct another car from its parking space. This time he was tipped with a cigarette.

"They must be at his mercy," Evan said. "It looks like blackmail."

"What's that over there?" someone asked.

Paula looked toward a vendor in the shade. His bicycle had been transformed into a stand with an ice box and a tray for holding assorted syrup bottles. As she and Evan approached, the elderly Mexican nodded politely and continued to shave ice from a huge block in the metal ice box.

This was just the local color that a travel article needed, Paula thought despite her despair. "What is this for?" she asked the vendor in her best Spanish.

He answered in the incomprehensible Mayan dialect. Seconds later, the mail carrier was behind them handling the translation.

"It's for selling ices," Evan explained. "He asks if we want to buy some."

"Not this early in the morning!" she responded.

Evan persevered in Spanish. The ices vendor nodded, and the mail carrier grinned. Others from their group gathered to see what was going on.

The ices man demonstrated step by step how he made his product. He shaved slivers from the chunk of ice in the box, placed the shaved ice into a plastic glass and added a syrup smelling like banana, then gave it to the mail carrier who doffed his hat in thanks before taking his first sip.

Evan produced a bill from his pocket for the vendor, who nodded with pleasure. But the mail carrier held his hand out for money too.

"A wily fellow," Evan chuckled, handing the mail carrier a bill too. "That wasn't in the deal."

"I wonder if they stage that every day when tourist buses stop here at the bank?" Paula mused aloud. The episode had at least diverted her

somewhat from her agony.

"You know the old saying," Evan said. "The fox has only one trick, but it's a good one."

She smiled. At least Evan was in a good humor. Looking up, she saw Matt approaching to take a picture of them with the mail carrier and the ices vendor.

"A good local color shot," he remarked to her.

"Yes," she responded in her coolest tone.

Matt's gaze stopped at her mouth.

She touched a finger to her upper lip, realizing how swollen it was now. Did he think that he'd bruised her with this morning's fervent kiss? Well, let him think what he pleased! It was just a mosquito bite — a reminder of yesterday's stupidity!

She headed back with Evan for the bus. At least he could be entertaining in even the most ordinary circumstances such as buying an ice for the local mail carrier. It would probably never have occurred to Matt to do anything like that.

"Is that a mosquito bite?" Evan asked as they sat down in the bus.

She pulled out a tiny mirror from her handbag and glanced at her reflection. "It certainly looks like it," she said. And it certainly is ugly, she thought, feeling even more glum.

"You're still pretty," Evan said softly, and when she looked up into his brown eyes, she knew he meant it.

"Thanks," she said. At least he seemed to care.

As they drove out of town, Paula made notes about the passing scenery: *new industrial area near Merida's airport, enormous cement factories, a Pemex Oil facility, fields of gray-green sisal hemp plants.*

"Looks like yucca," Evan commented. "A peculiar plant for a crop."

"Yet fortunes were made on it," Paula said, remembering from her research. "At one time, the Yucatan had the world's only supply of the fiber."

When the bus slowed in a village, there were Mayan women walking alongside the street nursing their babies. Several men carried huge bundles of thatch on their backs. Paula studied the typical native houses with curiosity. They were just ovals of white stucco with roofs of palm fronds, simple but graceful. Some had blue doors, and most were surrounded by widely spaced acacia poles serving as fences. Insubstantial as the fences looked, they kept the pigs in and only a few turkeys wandered along the road.

Beyond the village, the countryside was greener and surprisingly flat in all directions. It was not as jungly as Paula had expected, but it appeared inhospitable — a rough, harsh land with low-growing trees and

undergrowth. Despite the moisture in the air, it all looked arid.

Later they drove through a hacienda — one of the grand old estates enclosed by stone fences. "Since our land reform in 1924, this hacienda belongs to the people," Jacob explained over the microphone.

"Doesn't look like their methods have been updated since 1924 either," Evan said with irritation. He pointed out a donkey pulling a load of sisal along the old hacienda's narrow-gauge railway track, a group of Yucatecs trailing behind it. "Everything is still done by hand. Peon labor."

"No computers," Paula joked, hoping to diffuse his sudden change of mood. It appeared that anger lurked just beneath the surface — from his divorce, no doubt.

"Right. No computers," he answered, finally managing a smile.

As they drove through towns and villages there were open air markets with colorful fruits: bananas, watermelon, papaya. And always the lovely thatch-roofed houses, beautiful brown babies, the women in their embroidered white huipils, the men wearing guayabera shirts.

In the countryside, their bus was usually the only vehicle on the white limestone road that cut through the low green vegetation. Finally the land became hilly and the greenery more dense.

"Low jungle," Jacob called it. He launched into a discussion of their destination. "Uxmal is called 'the sublimity of Mayan architecture.' It is one of the most successful architectural achievements of Mayan civilization and is noted for the symmetry and proportions of its buildings," he said. "Uxmal reached its peak in the last half of the Classic Period — A.D. 600 to 900. From the tenth century on it suffered the gradual decline that was the fate of all centers of Mayan culture under foreign conquerors."

Despite Jacob's best efforts, Paula was entirely unprepared for the first awesome view of Uxmal as they rounded a curve in the road. A great white pyramid rose above the low jungle like a majestic phantom from the past.

"There it is!" she exclaimed with nearly everyone else on the bus, knowing that she was not going to be disappointed. "The Temple of the Magician!"

Climbing off the bus, she excitedly joined Jacob and the others near the great cistern where water had been stored thousands of years ago. Even in the shade of the trees, the air was humid, but not nearly as hot as Jacob had warned, since the day was cloudy.

It was difficult to believe that she actually stood where the ancient Mayans had once walked. As she looked away from the towering temple, she saw Matt striding toward her, camera around his neck, blond hair shimmering in the sunshine.

"Don't you think that we should work on this together?" he asked

evenly.

She was tempted to say she didn't care whether they sold the articles or not, but that was childish. "Yes, of course we should," she responded in her most businesslike manner.

"What happened to your lip?" he asked oddly, as if he thought he might have bruised it with this morning's kiss.

"Mosquito bite," she replied, turning her attention to Jacob's talk. It was all she could do to concentrate on it.

After he had expounded upon the white limestone Temple of the Magician towering before them like a ziggurat, Jacob said, "Okay, climbers, climb!"

Paula looked up, trying to ignore the pyramid's steepness and noble proportions. She didn't like heights, but a travel writer should climb up to report the view. She started for the pyramid.

"You're going to climb it?" Evan asked.

"I guess so."

He shook his head in disbelief. "Not me!"

She glimpsed Matt stepping away from Vanessa and her mother, and heading for the pyramid's steps too.

"Looks like only a few of us are going to try it," he said. He gestured toward the heavy iron chain anchored to the worn stone steps. "After you."

Paula stuffed the notebook in her shoulder bag, which she then hung around her neck. "Thanks."

She decided not to use the heavy chain since the few tourists climbing down were helping themselves along holding it. She started up the pyramid. The crumbling limestone steps were amazingly narrow, perhaps only five inches wide. Like everyone else, she placed her feet sideways to make her way up the stairway, holding the chalky steps above for balance. After several minutes, she paused to catch her breath and to assess her progress.

Looking down, her stomach lurched wildly at the steepness. She stood rooted in place.

"Hang on to the chain," Matt warned from just below her. "And don't look back."

"Thank you, but I can manage just fine!" she retorted. She'd have to mention in her article that Mayan pyramid climbing was not for everyone. She climbed on, angling toward the heavy chain, then holding onto it as she moved upward.

After a while she stopped for a momentary rest, noticing how far above the trees she'd climbed. Her stomach lurched again. She mounted the next step, then another, moving higher and higher on the seemingly endless staircase. The ancient steps were chalky and uneven,

and she was increasingly grateful for the rusty chain and the thick plastic treads under her white sandals.

Finally reaching the top of the pyramid, she stood up with trepidation in the balmy breeze. In the distance the hilly low jungle looked like green velvet backdrop for the magnificent gray limestone pyramids and other ruins all around. It seemed as if she had climbed into an ancient land, another civilization just below the gray clouds. It was the most magnificent sight she'd ever seen.

"You all right?" Matt asked as he ascended to the pyramid's top with her.

"Just fine," she insisted, although she felt dizzy when she realized there was no sign of steps beyond Matt. The pyramid was so steep that it appeared as if they were on a sky platform with no means of returning.

"You look pale," he remarked, walking to her.

They were alone; there was no way to avoid him. "I'm just fine!"

"Paula, I'm sorry about this morning. It's just that you looked so . . . beautiful, so inviting . . . as you do now."

Her head reeled as she backed away.

He grabbed her arm. "Paula! You'll kill yourself!"

"Then let go of me," she remonstrated, prying his hand from her arm.

Another climber stepped out on top with them, staring at them curiously, then there were more tourists, and Matt moved away.

She sat down as far away as possible from the pyramid's edges, and dug out her notebook to jot down impressions, her heart still hammering over their encounter. He'd no doubt have been delighted to kiss her up here in the sky, swollen lip and all! Perhaps it would be a first for him — kissing someone on top of a Mayan pyramid. Certainly a unique addition to his list.

Calming herself, she began to make notes about the surrounding ruins, familiar now from her research. She was relieved to see that Matt was taking pictures.

To the left, there was a group of Mayan structures, misnamed the Quadrangle of the Nunnery by the conquistadors because of the many cell-like chambers. Nearby was the ancient ball court — site of Mayan religious games. And there was the majestic Palace of the Governor, the House of the Turtles, and the House of the Doves. Tourists wandering among the vast expanses of ruins were mere flecks of color below, and in the distance over the low green jungle were the ruins of another ancient Mayan city, Kabah.

Matt shot pictures in all directions, then sat down beside her. Looking out toward the ruins he quoted, "The white stones of the dead and holy cities that stand now in solitude across the broad land of the

Mayan."

"You've read 'The Land of the Pheasant and the Deer,' " she commented. It was from the contemporary lyrical work of the Yucatan's most illustrious literary son, Antonio Mediz Bolio.

"You're not the only one who did some research."

"I'm glad to hear it," she returned.

Josh and others from the Santa Rosita group stepped onto the top. "I couldn't get Gayle to climb up here for anything," Josh said, amazed to see Paula.

"Paula's a regular mountain goat," Matt replied with a chuckle.

She shot him a furious glance since Josh had moved on to see the views.

"Ready to climb down?" Matt asked, unperturbed.

The longer she delayed, the more she would dread it, she told herself. "Ready."

"You're pale again."

"Never mind!" She swallowed hard and headed for the edge where the steps should be. There was only the narrow top step — and seemingly nothing but air below it! She backed away.

"I'll go first," Matt offered.

"Do you think I'll fall on top of you?" she snapped.

He chuckled. "Don't worry. I won't let you fall far."

"No, I don't suppose you would."

Smiling ruefully, he began his descent hanging onto the chain. "I didn't realize how feisty you could be. Anyhow, I *am* sorry."

He was so sorry that he'd immediately headed for Vanessa! she thought.

As she edged toward the first step, she was all too aware of him just below her. She would make it down alone, just to show him if nothing else!

"One step at a time," he cautioned.

Horrified, she kept her eyes on the steps and Matt moved steadily down the pyramid just below her as she grabbed the chain. She would never ever climb a pyramid again, she told herself as she began the slow descent. Each foot shook violently as it reached below for the next well-worn step; she was covered with perspiration despite the overcast sky.

As they moved down the pyramid, hanging onto the iron chain, she knew that Matt was climbing slowly for her benefit.

"Careful here," he warned where more limestone had chalked off.

It seemed forever until she reached the bottom of the steps and stood gratefully on the ground, her legs trembling.

"I think you have a touch of vertigo," he said with amusement.

She darted him a furious look and started for the path leading through the ruins. How dare he find her terror humorous! He probably thought that their romantic interlude had been too!

She made her way silently through the ruins among wildflowers and grasses. Their group had moved on, and she and Matt hurried along to catch up, taking notes and pictures as they went. She'd finally calmed down when they joined their group by the ruin of the Palace of the Governor. Avoiding Matt, she took notes about its stone frieze composed of thousands of tiny pieces fitted together to form images of serpents, latticework, thrones, huts, and columns.

"How was the climb?" Evan asked when she'd finished.

"Wonderful," she answered, ignoring Matt's grin. "I'm sure that Matt has some fantastic pictures."

As they moved along to the hundreds of unexcavated ruins among the weeds and wildflowers, both Matt and Evan stayed at her side, occasionally eyeing each other.

They stepped through a unique corbeled arch and into a blackened room where the ancients had once lived. "How will I ever describe a corbeled arch?" Paula asked Evan.

"Say they're inverted V's with short wooden lintels on top," he suggested.

Matt busied himself taking photos through the arch. As they moved outside again, he focused on the ruins the low jungle was quickly reclaiming.

Vanessa spied him. "There you are, Matt! Would you like me to pose for you by the ruins?"

"Certainly," he answered. "Who could resist such an offer?"

Certainly not Matt! Paula thought. Vanessa was as strikingly sensual as usual in scanty white shorts and a low-cut white T-shirt. No one would even notice the unique arch in the pictures.

Paula was glad to leave them behind and to capture the flavor of the ancient site in her notes. She rejoined Jacob and the group.

"For centuries the local Mayans have tried to keep the cities of their ancestors secret," Jacob said. "They did not want to disturb the past. Once the digging began, skeletons of the ancient nobility were found inside the pyramids. There were also skeletons found in great clay jars in the fetal position, some buried with their dogs since dogs were thought to lead the way to paradise. And some partially decomposed bodies with their lips sewn so they wouldn't whisper and disturb the living."

Mrs. Perotta waved her hand in disgust. "We don't need to hear about that."

"Older people prefer not to hear about death," Evan murmured.

"I'm not sure it's only older people," Paula responded, considering her own mixed feelings. "My grandparents didn't seem at all frightened. They believed in heaven — in another life beyond death."

"Do you?" he asked seriously.

"I used to. It made life a lot simpler and death a lot easier. But I

don't know anymore."

"I think it's all nonsense," he replied. "Science has disproved religion time and time again."

She recalled reading that it was only the biased interpretation of science that could "disprove religion," but she did not feel like discussing it now. She moved on with the group.

The sun beamed through the gray clouds, creating a pinkish glow on the ancient ruins. How magnificent it had once been here. Where had the people gone to? And why? According to Jacob, there were no real answers. Only speculation that they had worn out the land, or been driven away by a warlike tribe, or revolted against the priests and nobility who held the secrets of their culture.

All too soon the group had circled through the extensive ruins and back to the Pyramid of the Magician.

"Time to leave," Jacob said, and they headed reluctantly for the parking lot where the bus waited.

Paula stood out in the shade of a tree writing her impressions until the last moment. Not far away, Matt took some final photographs.

"Not enough time," Matt said as they climbed onto the bus together.

Her feelings precisely, but she was not even going to answer him. She sat down next to Evan on the front bus seat. How she'd like to return to spend days roaming through these ruins when she wasn't so upset.

Minutes later, the ruins and Uxmal were far behind them.

"Time for lunch," Jacob said as they pulled off the road into a driveway leading through low green jungle to a modern two-story hotel.

In the ladies' lounge at the hotel, Paula combed her hair and was grateful to see that the welt on her lip was receding. Her face was slightly sunburned despite the morning's overcast sky.

Vanessa and her mother stepped into the lounge, and Vanessa asked, "Whatever happened to your lip?"

Paula flushed, but fortunately didn't look any redder in the mirror. "Mosquito bite."

"Really?" Mrs. Perotta said in disbelief.

Let them think what they want, Paula decided, grabbing her shoulder bag and hurrying out to the hotel lobby.

In the new downstairs dining room, she quickly found a table with some elderly members of the Santa Rosita group. "Aren't you married to that blond fellow?" one of the men asked. "I thought I saw him leaving your room this morning."

"No. He and Josh are roommates. He only stopped in to get something." *A kiss!* she thought angrily.

"He's very handsome," one of the women remarked. "And the one you were sitting with on the bus is nice looking too."

"We're old friends," Paula said lightly. If only everyone would leave

her alone about Matt and now Evan!

The conversation shifted to their morning at Uxmal, then to the afternoon's excursion to the ruins at Kabah. There was a feeling of camaraderie among them, as if they'd all set out on a great expedition, and Paula began to relax.

For lunch there were refreshing watermelon slices and a delicious cabbage soup. The huipil-clad waitresses and white uniformed busboys moved with a quiet efficiency throughout the large dining room. Outside the tall windows, a beautiful swimming pool was surrounded by coconut palms, hibiscus, and jacaranda trees.

At least she was having a respite from Matt and Evan, Paula thought as she enjoyed the entrée: chicken steamed with onions and peppers, served over rice, and accompanied by a scoop of the thick Mayan black beans. For dessert, their waitress served a delectable custard cake with bright green frosting.

At two o'clock as the bus set out for nearby Kabah, Mayan women walked along the road carrying bright parasols against the sun. "Where are they going?" Paula asked. There had been no villages for miles.

"They live back in the jungle," Jacob explained. "They come here to work at the hotel."

"How on earth do they live in the jungle?" someone inquired.

Jacob shrugged. "As they have in their huts for centuries. There are wild turkeys, deer, and quail for them to eat. They have small garden patches and cornfields, and honey to sell. Their husbands hunt and gather honey."

Beside her Evan remarked, "They look happy."

"Just what I was thinking," she replied.

Within minutes, the driver pulled the bus off alongside the road. As they climbed off, the afternoon's heat and humidity hit. Evan joined Paula as Jacob led them down a well-trodden path into the jungle.

Overhead, the sky had turned bright blue with great puffy white clouds; a buzzard circled over the trees. On the path, a huge iguana slunk lazily toward the underbrush. Beyond, at a turn in the jungle pathway, there was a great corbeled arch that looked like a triumphal entry to a city. There was no building around it, nothing except a crushed white limestone pathway into the tangle of trees and underbrush.

"The *sache,* the sacred white road," Jacob explained. "The arch signals the beginning of the path that once carried torchlit Mayan religious processions to Uxmal through the jungle by moonlight. It was also the commercial road upon which slaves carried salt and wood on their backs for trading. These people did not use wheels, nor anything round like the sun which they worshiped — so they carried their goods."

"Fools," Evan said.

Paula ignored him, taking notes.

After a while Matt joined her to take pictures. "Paula, I really am sorry about this morning."

"I don't want to talk about it anymore." She walked away. He would only hurt her again, she told herself over and over as she returned to the bus. There was no point in even discussing it with him.

When they were all aboard the bus again, it was only a minute's drive across the road to the central ruins of Kabah. The driver parked their bus in a parking lot inhabited by eight turkeys.

When they had congregated around Jacob, he said, "The most famous building is straight ahead, the Temple of the Masks. You will see its facade is completely covered by the masks of the long-nosed rain god, Chac."

Paula strolled across the field with the others to the ruins. Indeed the entire facade of the temple was a frieze of Chac masks, row upon eloquent row of projecting snouts mutely beseeching the rain god's favor. Kabah, she recalled from her research, was nearly untouched; archeologists had only renovated the one temple. Other temple tops had fallen down. Yellow butterflies fluttered among the ruins and the encroaching jungle.

Beside her, Matt looked determined to ignore their last interchange, though his voice sounded strained. "I understand that cities like this once connected the entire province every four miles. Wish I could get an overall shot of this, but I doubt that Tom Timmons would spring for a private plane."

She tried to appear preoccupied, making notes about the weeds sprouting from the unexcavated mounds — the jungle reclaiming people's work.

It was a short climb up worn limestone steps to the Temple of the Masks, where the frieze and cornices were still in good condition. Unfortunately many of the elephantlike noses of Chac, the rain god, had been stolen by looters and undoubtedly sold.

"The priest would climb down these steps, which were made to look like the back of an alligator," Jacob said, then went on to explain how the Mayan priesthood was passed down to the eldest son.

"Power, always the quest for power," Matt said beside her.

Paula made no comment, but edged slowly away from him. Wasn't that what Matt had done in creating his electronics company? Wasn't his quest for money the same thing? And hadn't he used his physical power on her this morning?

As the group moved through the ruin, the smell of smoke reached them — somewhere a Mayan farmer was burning back the jungle to plant his cornfield.

How primitive it still is, Paula wrote in her notebook. *Yet how surprising after so many centuries to see ruin after ruin still not quite overtaken by the jungle.*

Had it been hacked back by the archeological expeditions or was the clearing the result of the caretakers' efforts? She'd have to ask later.

When they returned to the parking lot, Evan awaited her with a cold soft drink and a seat under a thatch-roofed ramada. It seemed that the caretaker of Kabah — owner of the turkeys bobbing about around them — also ran the concession stand with his smiling wife and children. Just behind the stand was his thatch-roofed house.

Upon their return to the hotel in Merida, Matt asked her, "Don't you think we should have some photos of the marketplace?"

"Yes, and I should see it, I suppose. Just give me a few minutes to freshen up." She felt exhausted.

Ten minutes later, in the lobby, she was pleased to see that others, including Gayle and Josh, would accompany them. Starting out through the city, she noted how different the crowded sidewalks and streets were in comparison with yesterday's light Sunday traffic. University students and office workers, just let out, flooded the streets. On the corners, women vendors sold carved papayas as well as pungent hot sausages roasted with onions.

In the *mercado,* the marketplace, the colorful shops were jammed together and crowded with bustling housewives and workers. At a wicker shop, Gayle and Josh purchased some lidded baskets. "They're for keeping rolls warm at the table," Gayle said.

"Ah, domesticity!" Matt teased them.

Paula bought two of the baskets for herself.

When they returned to the hotel at seven o'clock, Paula told Gayle, "I'm so tired, I have to go to bed."

"I hope you're not getting sick," Gayle fretted.

"I'll be fine tomorrow."

"You'll miss dinner and the nightclub show here in the hotel."

"I'm afraid I don't even care," she admitted as she undressed. She slipped into her blue nightgown and lay down on the bed. "I'd appreciate your making mental notes of the evening for me."

"Of course, I will."

She'd been dreaming something dreadful when Gayle returned from dinner and the show hours later. "Was it good?" Paula asked groggily.

"Not as good as last night. Pretty much the same dances."

"What about Matt?"

"He was with Vanessa."

Paula rolled over, numbed with exhaustion. When she finally fell asleep again, the dreadful dream continued, ending with Matt and Vanessa in a passionate embrace.

7

She sat on the edge of her bed and sleepily watched Gayle trundle her suitcase into the hotel hallway.

"Are you sure that you don't want me to call the hotel doctor?" Gayle asked. "You look dreadfully pale."

"I'll be fine," Paula replied, forcing herself to stand up. She'd have to pack and get dressed, she reminded herself, though her mind seemed so fuzzy that nothing came into focus. She would *have* to be fine! This afternoon they'd visit the gem of the Yucatan's archeological ruins — Chichen Itza.

Gayle looked uncertain about departing. "Are you positive that you'll be all right?"

"I'm certain," Paula insisted, though she felt far from it. A headache lurked behind her eyes, and she was dizzy.

Gayle sighed in resignation. "Don't forget to leave your suitcase out in the hallway by seven-thirty."

Paula smiled wanly. "This morning you *are* playing mother hen. I've already called room service. All I need is some coffee, and I'll come around."

"I hope so," Gayle said as she closed the door behind her.

At length, the same bellboy who'd delivered yesterday's breakfast arrived with her tray — and this time there was no Matt.

The steaming hot coffee revived her, scrambled eggs and toast satisfied her hunger, and an aspirin masked her headache. In the mirror, her sapphire blue cotton blouse and crisp white bermuda shorts did wonders for her appearance. Fortunately, the Yucatan's humidity enhanced the natural waves of her blond hair.

By the time she stepped outside the hotel to catch the tour bus, she felt slightly better. She stopped to buy one of the inexpensive Meridan straw hats for the day's outing. As she waited for the vendor to make change, she noticed that Matt and Vanessa were shopping across the street. No doubt they were now "an item," and she'd been saved from further romantic agonies.

Moments later as Matt crossed the street toward her, his eye contact was quick and volcanic. She stood transfixed.

"How are you, Paula?" he inquired. "Gayle said you're not feeling well."

"I'm fine, thank you," she replied evenly. She accepted her change from the hat vendor, and when she turned, Matt was still gazing at her.

Vanessa slipped her arm through his. "Let's get a good seat. Paula and *her friend,* Evan, had the front one yesterday." She turned him away with a proprietary hand on his arm.

Paula crammed the straw hat on her head.

Evan stepped to her side. "I missed you last night," he said with a warm glow in his brown eyes. "I hope you're feeling better."

"Yes, thanks." She glanced thoughtfully at him. How kind he was. She'd never really known him in high school, not from three or four dates. She added, "I slept and slept and slept."

"You still look sleepy. You're certain you weren't up doing all of the nightspots?" he teased.

Paula laughed. "That would have been the last thing I needed."

He smiled, but his eyes probed hers seriously through his horn-rimmed glasses. For an instant Paula suspected he didn't believe her, but that was foolish. "We'd better get on the bus," she suggested and headed for it.

Vanessa had indeed wangled the front seat with Matt this morning. "It's a good seat for taking pictures," he said as Paula climbed on.

"Yes, it is," she agreed coolly and started down the aisle.

The only seats left were in the very back of the bus. She and Evan settled by the window in the shade, yet by the time they left Merida, their window was directly in the sun's glare.

Jacob discussed the passing sights, and Paula took notes, becoming increasingly drowsy as they rode through the countryside *Windmills whirl over unkempt sisal fields by abandoned haciendas,* she wrote. *Cajonal — the yellow wildflowers from which bees make honey for local consumption and export. Brahma cattle . . . a sisal shredding plant . . . villages with their clusters of oval huts surrounded by garden patches and banana, orange, and papaya trees . . . an abandoned church with no roof . . .*

She dozed off, and her head bumped against the window. Awakening, she glanced out sleepily and wrote again. *A small boy carrying a bucket of shelled corn to be gound . . . a woman cooking over an outdoor fire . . .*

Her mind wandered, and her eyes drifted shut again. After a while she remembered Matt holding her in the horse-drawn calesa, and she leaned against him contentedly. How wonderful to nestle on his shoulder and chest. The ride seemed endless, but she lay serenely in his arms.

"Paula . . .?" Evan said softly. "Time to wake up."

She opened her eyes with a start. She'd been sleeping on *Evan's*

shoulder, his arm around her! "I'm sorry!" she blurted, sitting up.

"My pleasure," he murmured, and rubbed his arm.

"Your arm must have gone to sleep. . . ."

He smiled. "Any time you want someone to cuddle up to, I'm available."

She blushed. "How long did I sleep?"

"Over an hour."

A new problem occurred to her. "I didn't take notes!"

"What a determined reporter you are," Evan said with a chuckle. "But there's no need to worry; I watched everything for you. Nothing much new — villages, abandoned sisal fields, and low jungle."

"Thanks!" It was bad enough to have missed everything for notetaking, but she'd wanted to enjoy every moment of the trip. She glanced out the window at a Mayan village as the bus parked in front of a modern two-story hotel. "Where are we?"

"Piste. We're going to get settled, then eat lunch before we journey out to Chichen Itza."

"Well, I'm not going to sleep through Chichen Itza!" she said, savoring the sound of the exotic name on her tongue. She would enjoy Chichen Itza and the rest of the trip *despite* Matt and Vanessa, despite anything, she decided as she gathered up her carry-on case, straw hat, handbag, and notebook.

Evan said, "You look much better now."

"How did I look before?" she asked in a wry tone.

"Pretty tired. Pretty and tired, that is."

"Now, Evan!" she protested.

Stepping out of the bus, Paula followed the group through tropical plantings to the hotel's outdoor registration desk near the pool. Joining the line, she discovered Vanessa's mother in front of her. Since they'd scarcely spoken to each other on the trip, she asked, "Are you having a good time, Mrs. Perotta?"

The woman simply cast a chilly look at her.

Vanessa and Matt, standing in the next line, witnessed the encounter. Matt's lips drew back in a hard line. "Did you sleep well on the bus, Paula?" he asked.

"Yes, as a matter of fact I did." How had he noticed from the front seat? Had he come all the way to the back of the bus to see her? "I've been terribly tired. I dozed off."

"So I noticed."

He had come to see her!

Behind her Evan explained, "I didn't think I should wake you. At any rate, Matt said it wasn't important — just an idea for the articles."

Paula looked aside as tears misted her eyes. She was aware of Gayle standing to the side of the group, shepherding them along and probably

seeing the entire scene too.

Mrs. Perotta stepped forward to the registration clerk. "I want a single room tonight, and I don't mind paying for it." She glanced at Vanessa and Matt in the adjoining line. "I've never been known to stand in the way of romance."

Appalled, Paula bit her trembling lower lip as she listened to the clerk make the arrangements. What kind of mother would encourage her daughter like that? The idea of it was repugnant, absolutely horrid. If that was the sort of person Matt wanted to associate with, Paula thought, then she shouldn't even want to have anything to do with him!

Her emotions in chaos, she stepped to the registration desk. At the adjacent clerk's counter area, Matt and Vanessa obtained their keys — to adjoining rooms no doubt!

Once her arrangements were made, Paula grabbed her key and rushed up the outdoor stairway to her second-floor room. As she rounded the turn in the stairwell, she glimpsed Matt and Vanessa heading up the opposite stairway to the other wing of the building.

By the time she let herself into her room, her jaw was stiff with anger, her teeth clenched. She closed the door behind her, scarcely aware of the room as she stared uncomprehendingly into space.

Moments later, Gayle unlocked the door and stepped in, turning a concerned look on Paula. "Lovely room, isn't it?" she asked uneasily. "I didn't know what to expect here."

Paula looked around, seeing the room in a daze: glossy red tile floors, white walls, dark carved furniture, heavy draperies with geometric designs. Outside the sliding glass door, a wrought-iron railing enclosed the balcony overlooking the Mayan village of Piste. "It's fine," she said, sitting down dully on one of the twin beds.

"Are you going to have lunch?" Gayle asked in a careful voice. She turned to the mirror to tidy her upswept red curls with her fingertips, though her eyes were on Paula.

Paula shook her head. How could she possibly enter the dining room? By now it was obvious to everyone in the group that Matt had thrown her over for Vanessa.

"You have to eat," Gayle said.

Paula's heart twisted with anguish. Without warning, a sob escaped from the depths of her soul. She buried her face in the bedspread, weeping uncontrollably. How could this happen to her again? Why couldn't she find someone wonderful and dependable who would love her in return? Why did the men she fell in love with have to be Matts and Tonys?

She felt Gayle's hand rubbing her back. "Just get it out," she said softly. "Let all of your hurt out so you don't bury it and get all hard inside. Just cry it all out."

Much to her chagrin, Paula sobbed all the harder. She was barely aware of the door opening and of the embarrassed Mayan maid backing out with an armful of towels.

"Crying is supposed to be good for you," Gayle said, "but it certainly doesn't seem like it at the time."

Paula sobbed, "Why does this happen to me? Why can't I find someone like Josh who will love me and not hurt me?"

"I don't know," Gayle answered, her green eyes awash with compassion. "I'd so like to help you." She gave Paula a handful of tissues from her purse.

Paula blew her nose and wiped away her tears.

"The truth is that I think only God can help you," Gayle said seriously.

What did God have to do with this? As far as she could see, *if* He existed, He was allowing this to happen to her. Maybe He really was way out there in the universe . . . occasionally looking down on people as if they were ants scurrying in all directions. She'd never understand Gayle's kind of faith.

"Would you let me pray for you?" Gayle asked.

Paula lifted her shoulders dejectedly. "If you really think it would do any good. . . ."

Gayle reached for her hands.

"You mean now?" Paula protested, backing away. Her fingertips felt icy in Gayle's warm hands.

"Why not now?" Gayle responded, holding her hands firmly. She closed her eyes.

It appeared as if there were nothing else to do, and Paula reluctantly closed her eyes too.

"Heavenly Father," Gayle began, "we come to you with our hearts full of thanksgiving over this matter of Matt and Vanessa seemingly involved with each other."

Seemingly involved? Paula chafed. As for *hearts full of thanksgiving* — she felt no thankfulness at all.

Gayle continued, "We thank you and trust you, even though we don't always understand what is happening. We know that you never send trouble, and you want us to give thanks in absolutely everything."

It sounded absurd. Paula fretted, not finding an ounce of thanksgiving in her heart.

"We praise you, Heavenly Father," Gayle said with a voice full of trust. "We know what mighty works you can do, but so often we forget that it's so very simple for you to provide for our smaller earthly concerns too."

Smaller earthly concerns! Paula railed.

"We ask now a special blessing on Paula, that she might find your

wisdom and guidance in this entire matter," Gayle prayed. "We ask in the name of our Savior, Jesus, and thank you, Father. Amen."

Gayle squeezed her hands for an instant, then moved away. "And now let's clean up and sit by the pool until it's time for lunch."

"I can't," Paula protested.

"You can," Gayle said firmly. "You can and you will. You have nothing in the world to be ashamed of."

"Stupidity," Paula replied.

"Let's count our blessings," Gayle said, trying to cheer her.

At the moment, Paula couldn't think of a single one.

After they had cleaned up, Paula donned her dark glasses, determined to hide the ravages of her grief. As they walked downstairs, there were still twenty minutes before lunchtime.

Josh waited patiently on a poolside chaise lounge for Gayle. "The gift shop looks interesting," he said.

"Marvelous," Gayle replied. "That's just what we women need, a good bout of shopping."

Paula mustered a wan smile, grateful Gayle had included her when she and Josh might prefer to be alone. Gayle was a true friend. That, at least, was a blessing.

In the quiet gift shop Paula eased away to avoid intruding upon them. After a while her despair lifted slightly, and she found a light, delicately woven white stole at such a reasonable price that she bought one for herself, another to set aside as a gift. Besides the ever-present white embroidered huipils, guayabera shirts, and hand-painted pottery, there were unique Mayan temple rubbings, colorful yarn dolls of Mayan dancers, and numerous handmade items.

She looked up and Evan was at her side. "Where did you come from?"

"I saw you across the pool. I was hoping that you'd join me for lunch."

Why not? Lunching with him would be better than walking into the hotel dining room alone — or tagging along with Gayle and Josh. "Thanks," she said. "I'd like to." She'd only have to be careful not to encourage him.

Later in the vast white dining room, no one mentioned her dark glasses. No one except Gayle — and maybe Evan and Josh — cared anyhow.

In the buffet line, she helped herself to a light lunch: cabbage slaw, a cucumber salad, carrot sticks, slices of turkey, and a huge chunk of papaya for dessert. As she and Evan wound their way to a table by the window, she glimpsed Matt, Vanessa, and Mrs. Perotta entering the room.

"Steady," Evan counseled from behind her.

Was her upset that obvious? she fretted, then realized Evan had warned her to steady her tilting salad plate.

When they were seated, a waitress stopped by to offer cola or coffee. The woman peered momentarily at Paula. It was the maid who walked into the room with towels during her tears.

"Something wrong?" Evan asked solicitously.

"Nothing," Paula responded with a shake of her head.

After a while he asked, "Aren't you going to eat?"

She promptly picked at her chilled salads, papaya, and turkey.

After lunch she and Evan rested in poolside chaises until it was time to board the bus. She didn't even want to speculate where Matt might be with Vanessa. In any event, he was absolutely not going to spoil her outing at Chichen Itza!

At boarding time, Jacob waited beside the bus as the group climbed on. "And now Chichen Itza, the jewel of the Yucatan."

Paula found herself saying, "I hope so, after so many years of hearing about it."

"I guarantee that you won't be disappointed," Jacob stated. "If you have any special questions, be sure to ask. Your photographer said that you're writing articles for a newspaper."

"Yes," Paula responded, wondering how Matt happened to tell Jacob that.

She passed Matt without a glance. He was apparently saving a window seat for Vanessa.

"Here's a good place," Evan suggested, and Paula sat down with him in the middle of the bus.

Finally everyone was seated, Vanessa last as expected, wearing a strapless black sundress that showed off far more than her tan.

Paula looked out the window as the bus took off. The actual village of Piste appeared to be back beyond the main road. Judging by the construction of hotels, gas stations, and restaurants, the main highway was turning into a commercial zone. Sad. "I'd like to explore the village," she thought aloud.

"Tonight," Evan answered. "We can take it in tonight."

It seemed only minutes later that the scenery changed from village to low jungle, and before long they pulled into a chalky white parking lot jammed with other tour buses.

"Chichen Itza!" Jacob announced.

Outside, the air was hot and humid, but their group gathered excitedly under the shade of a huge Indian laurel tree. Jacob said, "We begin at New Chichen, which is sometimes called Kukulcan — Mayan for the Quetzalcoatl of the Toltecs, who arrived as a god and a myth in the tenth century when the warlike Toltecs invaded. However, the real

Kukulcan did not arrive until the middle of the thirteenth century. . . ."

Paula was surprised to find Matt at her side, his camera ready.

"What's the slant for this article?" he asked in a businesslike tone.

"I don't have a specific slant yet. It will be on Chichen Itza and the surrounding area."

"Fine," he responded equably.

"Let's go," Jacob said and the group moved eagerly along behind him to the entry gate.

Paula glanced at Vanessa. She did not look pleased about Matt's working with Paula. Evan, regretfully, didn't look too thrilled either at the moment.

Passing through the crowded entry gate into New Chichen Itza, Paula was struck by the incongruous expanse of manicured grass stretching out in all directions, then by the awesome hulk of a grayish pyramid looming skyward before her. "El Castillo?" she asked.

"El Castillo," Jacob replied. "So named because the Spanish thought it a fortress-castle. But for the Mayans, this was a temple for sun worship. You see the four massive stairways facing the cardinal points, each with 91 steps, adding up to 364 — plus one, the summit — totaling 365, the number of days in a year."

Paula took rapid notes as he continued.

". . . 52 panels on the sides, corresponding to the number of years in the Toltec religious calendar . . . 18 sections of terraces on each side, representing their eighteen-month year. The pyramid was built over earlier construction, probably dating from the early time of Toltec occupation.

"Now, for our climbers, there is a wonderful preserved Chac Mool — you remember the reclining figure with the sacrificial plate on his abdomen — and a jade-inlaid jaguar throne of the priest inside. . . ."

Matt darted a questioning glance at her. "You going to climb again?"

"Why not?" she replied. This time they'd at least be going up the pyramid inside El Castillo. It was unlike the pyramid at Uxmal that was a platform out in the sky.

Jacob waved them on. "Okay, climbers!"

Paula looked up at the towering pyramid and caught a deep breath.

"You're not going up again?" Evan asked.

She nodded determinedly.

Making her way to the pyramid's entry in silence with Matt, she thought she at least might try to mend their old friendship. "Look at that sky," she began. "You were saying at Uxmal that you preferred a blue sky with white clouds. Now you have it, though they do have gray linings."

He glanced at the sky. "Yes, a very dramatic sky — sunny, yet

tropical. Looks as if a storm lurks in every one of those clouds."

Like her own confused emotions lately, she mused.

Vanessa, not intending to climb El Castillo, stood aside with her mother as Matt and Paula joined fellow climbers near a small entry at the base of the pyramid's north stairway.

They'd barely begun making their way up the damp, narrow passageway when the entire line of people stopped abruptly. Matt bumped into her. Her knees went weak, and she caught her breath.

"Sorry," he apologized.

She didn't answer. Would she never overcome her attraction to him?

Gasping tourists pressed past her on their way down the dimly lit stone stairwell.

"Is the climb worth it?" someone in the line of climbers behind her asked.

"It's dark, hot, and exhausting. We gave up."

Matt asked, "Paula, are you sure you want to do this?"

"You couldn't pay me to quit," she insisted, as much to assure herself as him.

Later, after ascending the steep slippery steps steadily for a long time, there was still no end in sight. Her legs ached and her white T-shirt and bermudas felt drenched with perspiration, yet she was determined not to quit.

The middle-aged threesome in front of her turned back. "We just can't make it," they admitted miserably.

When Paula decided she couldn't manage another step, someone said, "Almost there."

Twenty steps later, the stone monolith of Chac Mool loomed in front of her, his plate ready for a sacrifice. Her heart pounded so hard that it might have been a live heart delivered to him.

"Shall I take your picture sitting on the sacrificial plate?" Matt joked breathlessly.

"If I sit down," she gasped, "I'll never stand up again."

She mounted the final steps to the poorly lit throne room and stood behind the protective grill. The red jaguar throne! From this primitive bench Mayan priests had ruled Chichen Itza for centuries. Although encrusted with chunks of jade, there was nothing elegant about it. "It looks barbarous," she decided with a shudder as Matt stepped beside her to take pictures. "Primitive and barbaric."

"It was a bloodthirsty religion," Matt remarked.

Someone behind them in the stairwell said, "Aren't they all?"

"One bad religion is no reason to condemn them all," Matt answered with a hint of passion in his voice.

Paula cast a sidelong glance at him, then turned again to the throne room. Her mind flashed back to the time when he was a teenager

speaking so eloquently in church. Surely he'd outgrown that during his quest for power and money.

She turned her attention to the musty throne room, making mental notes for her article about the damp prisonlike cell. Beside her, Matt snapped picture after picture, varying the speed and aperture to compensate for the darkness since flash bulbs were not allowed.

Seconds later, it was time to leave.

"Let me go ahead of you," Matt insisted, starting down the steep steps first. "I remember the look on your face coming down the pyramid at Uxmal."

"I'm fine," she insisted, though she wished for a handrail. The rock walls of the pyramid were wet from constant humidity and lack of sun and air. Climbing down, the steps seemed steeper than before.

She squinted through the murky light, barely seeing the steps, feeling with each foot. Descending was far worse than climbing up. Climbers ascending the steps in the narrow passageway stopped to let her and Matt pass. She noticed that he made his way down slowly, occasionally turning to wait for her.

"You all right?" he asked.

"Fine, thanks —"

Suddenly her foot slid over a slippery step. Jerking her arms up for balance, she plunged forward in the near darkness, a short scream ripped from her throat.

"Paula!" Matt cried out. He reached up and grabbed her in his arms, staggering, then braced himself against the wet wall.

She clung to him, eyes closed in relief and pressing her face into his shoulder. "I'm sorry," she finally apologized, still trembling. "I nearly took you down with me!"

"I owed you one," he answered.

She pulled away. "What do you mean?"

"Don't you remember when you caught me falling off the kitchen stool at home?"

"You remember that?"

"How could I not remember falling into the arms of a beautiful woman?"

She didn't answer. She presumed he recalled her bringing him the roses then too.

He turned to move on. "Ready?"

"Yes." His recollection so surprised her that she descended the rest of the ancient steps far more quickly.

The Santa Rosita group waited near the base of El Castillo. "You look absolutely white," Gayle said to Paula. "What happened?"

Paula answered, "Nothing much."

"She almost fell," Matt said.

"You'd better sit down," Evan suggested, taking her arm.

"No, I just need to catch my breath for a minute," she insisted. She wasn't certain what had shaken her most: the momentary plunge into the darkness, Matt's catching her in his arms and holding her so firmly, or his remembering the day of the roses.

When they strolled to the ancient ballcourt near El Castillo, Matt rushed ahead to take pictures while Paula made notes. The two stone rings used as ball hoops still protruded from the walls. Jacob explained, "The players could only hit the rubber ball with forearms, hips and buttocks, which were covered with pads. The game was deadly serious — so serious that the losers were often sacrificed."

Matt eyed the Temple of the Jaguars built into a side of the ballcourt. "How shall we do this shot?"

"Lots of close-ups of the jaguars on the frieze, I think. And some good distant shots too."

Later Evan accompanied her along the Mayan's *sache.* The broad sacred road led through the jungle to Chichen Itza's famous *centote* — the Well of Sacrifices. The dark foreboding waters of the well were surrounded by sheer rock walls.

At the upper rim were the remains of a small temple that Jacob explained had probably been used as a steambath for purification rites. "The well was believed to be the home of the rain god, Chac," Jacob said. "It was used only for ritualistic purposes. During droughts or other disasters, children — drugged with copal to calm their struggling — were thrown into the water to plead for help from Chac. Their bones as well as gold and jade had been dredged out."

Paula shuddered.

"I thought they only threw in virgins," Evan commented.

"Children under twelve, according to the archeologists," Jacob answered.

Paula glanced at Evan, speculating on his view of virginity. She suspected that it would be more important to him than to someone as experienced as Matt.

Looking away, she found Matt and Vanessa watching them. It occurred to Paula that complications like hers had happened throughout the centuries — that her anguish over Matt was nothing new or unusual. Surely it had happened to Mayan maidens, different as their culture had been. The old phrase was "eternal triangle." Eternal indeed!

When they left New Chichen Itza and crossed the road to enter the original Mayan settlement, Matt took pictures of a darling barefoot Mayan girl in her white huipil. Perhaps three or four years old, she posed with delight and pointed out her thatch-roofed house in the caretakers' village. Bright clothing flapped from lines strung among the

banana trees, a pig lay in the shade, and turkeys bobbed through the grass, much as they might have centuries ago.

Matt seemed quite taken with the child. "Ask her if she speaks Spanish," Matt suggested to Paula.

Paula questioned her, but the girl replied in a Mayan dialect. "I read that some Mayans refuse to speak anything except their native tongue," she explained.

The tiny girl trailed happily along with them, smiling at their wonder over the ruins of her forefathers in Old Chichen Itza, especially the amazing ancient observatory.

"*El Caracol,* the snail," Jacob translated. "Mayan astronomers charted the heavens from it as early as the fifth century. Using its data, priests selected auspicious days for planting and harvesting, warning the people of eclipses and the need for sacrifices."

"It seems as if we've really entered another century," Paula said as Matt took pictures from all angles. There were very few other tourists in Old Chichen and almost no restoration of the ruins. When they climbed to the top of a small pyramid, it appeared that the dark green jungle could swallow all of the ruins in a matter of days.

Paula noticed Matt posing the Mayan girl in front of the various ruins as they left. The pictures would be spectacular for this article.

The girl followed behind them, now carrying a long sprig of wild lilac she'd picked up somewhere at the edge of the jungle. At the bus, Matt offered her money for posing for the pictures, but she shook her head. Instead, she pulled down his face to hers, ran her fingers through his golden hair, then kissed his cheek.

"Really, Matt, isn't she a bit young?" Vanessa asked, and his color rose, though it didn't seem to spoil his pleasure.

The child, her brown eyes shining, handed Paula the sprig of wild lilac and danced away. Standing outside the bus, she waved at them as they settled into their seats: Paula with Evan, Matt with Vanessa.

When the bus pulled out of the parking lot, Paula returned the girl's waves, then inhaled deeply of the fragrant wild lilac. Why had the girl wanted to kiss Matt? Was it his blond hair? It would be unusual for the dark Mayans, but surely there were many other blond tourists. Or was it something she sensed about him? Possibly the same attributes that she herself had been attracted to years ago?"

She decided to press the sprig of flowers in her guidebook, not only for its beauty, but to remember the lovely Mayan child who had kissed Matt so tenderly . . . and given the flowers to her. The gesture struck her as what Gayle would call a blessing.

8

When they returned to the hotel in Piste, Paula felt hot, exhausted, and covered with dust. Hurrying upstairs to her room for a shower, she caught a glimpse of the men below. Matt stood near the pool talking with Josh and Evan. It struck her as curious that Evan would be included in the conversation, though she supposed they were merely discussing the day's events.

Later, as she returned downstairs refreshed, she found only Evan waiting on a poolside lounge. He stood immediately, looking neat in a clean white polo shirt and tan slacks. "Ready to check out the village?" he asked.

"Ready!" she replied. Her yellow notebook was now smudged and creased, but, as always, in hand. "Good. You're carrying your camera."

"Thought I'd try some shots for your articles," he explained.

There was no point encouraging unreal expectations. "The *Times* is paying very little, and the pictures will be chosen by the editor."

"Don't worry, I just thought it'd be fun to have some pictures published," he responded and propelled her by the arm toward the hotel entrance. "Matt doesn't have a contract with them, does he?"

"No, not at all. But he used to do a lot of photography for the *Times* when he was in high school."

Evan shrugged. "Matt used to do *everything* when he was in high school."

Jealousy? That seemed absurd. Matt was five years older and had been in college when Evan entered Santa Rosita High. Still, Matt had made quite a mark in the community as a young leader. She supposed that mothers asked their sons, "Why can't you be more like Matt Montgomery?" His business success very likely galled many young Santa Rosita men too.

As she and Evan walked alongside the highway, occasional trucks roared by, heading for Cancun. Mayan men arrived home in Piste for the evening in crowded pickup trucks; others rode bicycles, some with bundles of firewood strapped to the rear racks. Beautiful brown children ran out to greet them.

"Do you want to look at the shops?" Evan asked, nodding toward the colorful tourist attractions across the street.

She calculated about an hour of good light remained for pictures. "I'd rather walk into the village as long as we're not too intrusive. Maybe we could stop at the shops when it gets dark."

Behind the roadside restaurants, hotels, bars, and shops, they found a dirt road leading into the residential area of the village. Trees with heavy clusters of bananas hung over the rock walls and acacia pole fences; the oval thatch-roofed huts were interspersed with brightly painted modern stucco dwellings. Open doors and windows welcomed the slightest breezes, and, inside, the natives rested in hammocks slung from the ceilings.

"Don't they have beds?" Evan asked.

Paula shook her head. "Not according to what I've read. Mattresses would probably be covered with mildew within days after rainy season begins!"

Three little Mayan girls joined them, whispering and giggling as they skipped along, reminding Paula of the child at Chichen Itza, but these requested money to pose for Evan's pictures. He didn't seem to mind. As they moved through the village, he took photos of bright red flowers amid the tropical greenery, a white steer gazing at them through an acacia pole corral, a small park with its statue of a mother and baby, and a church playground where boys played soccer and teenage girls sat on benches to applaud.

Paula approached one of the schoolgirls. "Is this your church?" she asked in Spanish.

"Iglesia vieja," the girl answered. The old church. She pointed out the modernistic church on the other side of the playground as if expecting it to be of more interest.

"May we take pictures of the old church?" Paula asked.

"Sí," the girl responded with a flash of pride, although the old church had obviously fallen into neglect and now appeared abandoned.

Paula walked up the worn wooden steps of the church. She and Evan halted at the sight of people and household furnishings inside the open door. An elderly woman sitting on a couch waved them in. "Would you like to see the church?" she asked with a Mayan lilt to her Spanish.

"Sí," Paula replied.

"Maybe we shouldn't," Evan said, hanging back. "They *live* in here!"

The smiling woman motioned insistently that they enter. Apparently visitors were truly welcome.

As Paula and Evan stepped in, the woman led them through the living quarters to a simple but charming yellow sanctuary, then made her departure.

Paula's eyes went to the slightly raised altar, where a hand-hewn wooden table served as a pulpit. Behind it, arched niches held fresh flowers and endearing figures of Jesus. Fans suspended from the ceiling hung motionless, and perhaps twenty rustic wooden benches awaited a congregation.

Sitting down on a worn pew, a feeling of peace crept through her. She was aware of Evan's camera clicking, then of his leaving by the side door, but a sense of holiness held her in place. It was as if the prayers of the parishioners still lingered, filling the sanctuary with faith. She recalled that she had just returned from Chichen Itza, one of the most religious sites of the Mayan civilization, without feeling a trace of love or even a closeness to God. Here in the simple old church, a gentle love filled the sanctuary, blessing it so that she was compelled to bow in prayer.

For an instant she had no idea of what to say, then finally the words came. *Heavenly Father,* she prayed, *if you're real, if Jesus is real — I would so like to know. I suppose it seems terribly presumptuous of me, but I truly want to understand.* She could think of nothing else except something she had learned in Sunday school as a child. *I pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.*

She opened her eyes and sat for a long time, wondering if somehow she might receive an answer, but there was nothing except the love in the eyes of the figure of Jesus. Reluctantly she stood up and walked through the pews to the side door.

Outside, Evan waited, raising an eyebrow at her. "I didn't know you were religious," he said.

"I don't know that I am," she replied. Her years of Sunday school didn't seem to take, though occasionally she thought to say The Lord's Prayer at bedtime. That was the extent of her spiritual life. She assessed from Evan's tone of voice and previous comments that he wasn't "religious" — whatever that meant. Suddenly, she felt sad.

On the way back to the hotel, Evan reached for her hand, and she quickly occupied it by jotting notes about the village: *picturesque but slowly departing from the primitive simplicity and charm . . . unfortunately becoming "civilized."* Feeling guilty she said, "I've enjoyed walking through this village nearly as much as I did Merida."

"I just plain enjoy being with you," he replied.

Disconcerted by the warmth in his brown eyes, she finally managed a smile. "Thanks, Evan." She glanced away at her watch. "I guess there is time for shopping before dinner."

At the dinner table in the dining room, she realized that many of their group were missing. "Where are Gayle and Josh?" she asked an elderly couple, part of the Santa Rosita crowd. Matt and Vanessa were absent too, though Mrs. Perotta was at the next table talking with one of the

unattached men her age.

The woman beside her looked surprised. "Why, they took taxis to the light and sound show in Chichen Itza. I suppose they're having dinner at one of the hotels there. I thought all of you young people would be going."

"No one asked me," Paula replied, astounded. And she was the one who was supposed to be writing travel articles! She turned to Evan. "Did you know?"

"I did know they were going," he admitted, sipping his wine. "Didn't Gayle ask you?"

Paula shook her head in disappointment. "I can't imagine. . . ."

After dinner she was still annoyed at not being invited to the light and sound show in Chichen Itza. Strolling on the hotel's garden paths with Evan, she tried to forget her irritation. The sultry tropical air had cooled slightly, and her spirits lifted at seeing the night sky filled with stars. Moonlight illuminated the crushed limestone under their feet, reminding her of the ancient Mayans' white paths for religious processions. Soft night sounds from the nearby jungle lent an exotic atmosphere to the evening.

They sat down on the chaises by the pool, but after a short while she said, "I think I'd better turn in. I can't imagine why I've been so tired."

"It's the humidity. We're just not used to it in California," Evan suggested.

She shrugged. "Probably. I'll see you in the morning."

"I'll walk you to the door, Paula."

"It's not necessary." After what she'd gone through with Matt, she did not want to get involved with any more romantic good-night scenes.

"I'll feel a lot better about it if I see you safely there," he protested.

"If you really insist . . ." Why was it that she always worried about hurting other people's feelings? she asked herself angrily.

Walking up the stairway, they discussed the next morning's ride to Cancun.

"I'm more interested in that than I was in seeing the ruins," Evan admitted. "You know the Mexican government selected the site for Cancun by computer. They input the climate, rainfall, location, and distance to the ruins — and who knows what else — then the computer chose Cancun as the best possible site in Mexico."

Not wanting to tell him that she'd already researched Cancun's resort beginnings, she quipped, "You're a computer nut!"

Evan grinned, capturing her hand in his. When she looked at him, she was certain that the glints of interest in his eyes had nothing to do with computers.

At her door, she quickly inserted the key and turned it. "Thanks,

Evan. Good night —"

Before she could rush into the room, he'd caught her by the shoulders and turned her to him.

"Please, no, Evan!" she protested.

He looked hurt as he moved away. "Don't you like me?"

She recalled his disastrous marriage and didn't want to further damage his ego. "Of course I do! Liking you has nothing to do with it! It's just that — that I'm so terribly tired."

"I'll see you in the morning," he said curtly and strode away.

The next morning as Paula hurried out to the hotel parking lot, most of the Santa Rosita group waited in the shade near the bus. Evan stood slightly apart from Gayle, Josh, and Matt, obviously watching for her. "I was about to go upstairs to pull you out of bed," he teased in an intimate tone.

A flood of heat rushed to Paula's cheeks. What on earth did Matt — and Gayle and Josh — think? Surely they realized that Evan was merely trying to be humorous!

Later, when she climbed on the bus, Matt was already sitting with Vanessa, so preoccupied with their conversation that they seemed unaware of her. Paula's spirits drooped as she sat down beside Evan. She opened her notebook. Cancun was about two hours away, and she hadn't taken any notes while sleeping on yesterday's trip. She couldn't afford to skip notes about the countryside today. At least that would keep her mind from Matt!

As the miles passed by, she kept her attention on the passing scenery. She was struck again by the beauty of the small villages with their rock walls. Purple bougainvillaea cascaded over walls and corrals, and red cannas bloomed at the doorway of many of the Mayan houses. The villages were primitive but natural; for once man had almost improved upon nature.

At Vallidad — the last city taken from the Mayans by the Spaniards — pink flowering trees gave a dreamlike quality to the community. "Spanish-speaking people are not welcome in the city," Jacob said. "Many tribes of Mayans — some 2,000 to 3,000 years old — are here, and they do not wish to change their ways. Some of them refuse to have their children learn Spanish in school."

"Sounds like an integration problem," Paula ventured. She noticed a Mexican military installation with uniformed soldiers in plain view.

"And not the kind we'd hear about in our newspapers!" Evan said with vehemence. "Seems to me that all we read about is what's bad about the United States while other countries' problems are overlooked by our reporters. I get mighty sick of it!"

He harbored a lot of suppressed anger, she thought again.

She turned to the window, writing notes as they drove out into the countryside. Mayan men cut the grasses at the roadside with gleaming machetes, and occasionally there were remnants of small cornfields.

"A vulture," Evan said. Leaning close to her, he pointed out the big dark bird circling over a field of bony white cattle. Evan's body brushed against hers and their eyes met.

She quickly looked out the window again, quietly watching the countryside, then finally the construction-choked streets of downtown Cancun. Evan cared for her, and she only wanted to be — What did she want? She'd been so foolish about Matt. Perhaps she was being stupid again, not giving Evan a chance.

She felt a sense of exhilaration as they drove through the parklike entrance to Cancun's island causeway. The change of scenery was stunning. The Gulf of Mexico shimmered like liquid sapphire to the north; to the south, shadings of turquoise from the Caribbean Sea streaked the blue water.

Ahead, the L-shaped island of Cancun jutted out into the water with its strip of luxury hotels, restaurants, night clubs, discos, tennis courts, and golf courses. Although most of the palm trees were still small, a few already towered in the sky from the long narrow island; yachts and excursion boats plied the waters. Here and there tourists water-skied, and in the distance, a brave one para-sailed over the sea.

Jacob pointed out the blocks of shops and restaurants. "And there's the international convention center where Ballet Folklorico performances are often featured."

Evan remarked, "I'd like to take you out to dinner there tonight."

"Thank you, Evan. . . ." Something stopped her. "Let's wait first to see how the schedule works out." She glanced toward the front of the bus and saw Matt's blond hair just above the seat.

Jacob said, "There, toward the end of the island, you see El Hotel Pyramide, your hotel."

Paula gave a short laugh. "What would the ancient Mayans say to see their architecture copied by modern hotel chains?"

Minutes later under the hotel's porte-cochere, the disembarking passengers bid their bus driver farewell. Jacob led them to the long registration desk in the cavernous white hotel lobby. "I'll be leaving you now," he said with a touch of regret. He made his individual farewells to everyone in the Santa Rosita group, collecting tips and cordially inviting them all to return to Mexico.

He told Paula with his usual sleepy grin, "Be sure to put me in your articles."

"Of course," she replied facetiously. But he'd no more than left when inspiration hit.

"You're looking very pleased with yourself, Paula," Matt said.

"I've had a brainstorm for the articles — I'm going to use a fictitious tour guide as a mouthpiece!" She explained her idea. "What do you think?"

Matt nodded thoughtfully. "A brilliant way to compress information."

"Some of which might be dull," she put in.

"You really do enjoy writing, don't you?" he asked. "You glow when you talk about it."

"Do I?" she marveled. "All I know is that I especially enjoy it when inspiration hits."

Vanessa, standing at Matt's side, looked annoyed with their conversation.

"Paula does have a degree in journalism," Evan commented from in front of them.

Moments later, they were at the registration desk. She was already tired, and it wasn't even time for lunch.

After they'd registered, Evan said, "We're just a few rooms apart. I'll pick you up for lunch at twelve-thirty."

She saw that Matt was watching, and she didn't care to create a scene. "Fine. Twelve-thirty."

Upstairs, Paula and Gayle admired their modern and spacious room with its cool garden decor of whites, blues, and greens. In addition to the two queen-sized beds and the usual furniture on the pale green carpeting, there was a raised dining area defined by tall white shutters standing ajar. The nearby windows overlooked the pool, pale beaches, and the shimmering blue sea.

"Why don't you and Evan join us for lunch?" Gayle suggested. "We've seen so little of you."

"I'd love to. I don't know about Evan."

Gayle gave her a sidelong glance. "What's going on between you and Evan? Or is it none of my business?"

"We're only friends," Paula said.

"Maybe you think so," Gayle said, "but you should see the way he gazes at you."

"What do you mean?"

"Josh says Evan looks at you as if you were strawberry ice cream, and Evan were crawling out of the desert."

"Really!" Paula laughed, although on second thought it wasn't so funny. Evan *had* just emerged from a desert of sorts after his divorce.

At twelve-thirty, both Evan and Josh arrived at the door to pick them up.

"Gayle's invited us to have lunch with her and Josh," Paula told

Evan. "I hope you don't mind."

Irritation flashed in his eyes for an instant, then he said, "Sure. Why not?"

Josh commented, "Good idea, Gayle."

In the hotel corridor, Paula's heart lurched. In front of them, Matt and Vanessa were walking toward the elevator. Vanessa wore a clinging green strapless dress and her arm was intertwined with his. Could they possibly be sharing a room?

Of course not, Paula reassured herself. Matt and Josh had the room adjacent to Gayle and hers. Vanessa's room was probably just down the hallway since the Santa Rosita group was all on the fourth floor.

"Join us for lunch?" Josh asked them.

Matt turned around, the color in his face deepening as he saw Paula and Evan. "Thanks. We'd like to."

"What's everyone doing today?" Gayle inquired brightly as they stepped into the elevator together.

"We're going shopping," Vanessa replied, still holding Matt's arm. "Aren't we, Matt?" she prompted with an intimate glance.

Gayle remarked, "I'm all for lying out on the beach or around the pool."

"I'm glad to hear it," Josh said as they walked into the hotel's cavernous lobby. "Paula, you're looking terribly tired."

Both Matt and Evan glanced at her.

"And I've been calling *Gayle* a mother hen!" Paula replied.

"I guess that makes me the rooster," Josh said with his lop-sided grin, and they all groaned. He slipped an arm around Gayle, giving her a quick squeeze. "Though I don't mind if she's the hen."

"Never mind that kind of talk!" Gayle laughed with a mischievous look at Josh.

Still chuckling, they arrived at the hotel's colorful Fiesta Restaurant.

As they were seated at a long table, Paula was grateful to see Gayle and Josh take the middle chairs, separating her from Matt and Vanessa.

After studying the menu, Paula said, "You won't believe this, but I'm dying for a hamburger and French fries."

Gayle grinned. "You're not the only one!"

Despite their amusement, the men ordered the same hamburger and French fries plate. Only Vanessa demurred, selecting a chef's salad.

"We can diet when we get home," Gayle said.

Perhaps it's more important for Vanessa to watch her figure since she's older, Paula thought. Vanessa's jet set friends in Cozumel were no doubt fashionably thin. Casting a quick look at Matt, she wondered if he'd go to Cozumel. He seemed unaware of her, admiring the view of the beach and the sea with Vanessa.

As they ate their hamburgers and French fries, Paula noticed that

Evan was having a third beer. She thought it odd that he and Vanessa never really joined the general conversation. It wasn't as if they were excluded; in fact, Gayle and Josh made special efforts to include them. It seemed more that they wanted to remain on the fringes of the group, that they preferred being outsiders, or didn't understand how to join in.

Still, it was a delightful lunch, Paula thought as they rose to leave.

"Are you sure you don't want to go downtown?" Evan asked her.

"No, thanks. I'm so tired I'd rather just spend a quiet afternoon alone in the sun."

"Fine. If that's what you want. I'll see you for dinner," he said and departed.

For dinner! By the time she collected her wits, it was too late to respond.

Later, as she settled on the white sandy beach, she felt as if someone were watching her. Squinting up into the sun, she saw Evan at the outdoor bar. Hadn't he gone downtown after all? She looked again a few minutes later. He was gone.

Turning with relief toward the turquoise sea, she lay down again and listened to the soft slapping of the waves against the shore. The talcum-soft sand under her orange beach towel was warm, the sound of the sea soothing; she read only a chapter of her paperback novel before drifting off to sleep.

An hour later when a strong breeze came up, she awakened and decided to move to the hotel pool. She found a lounge in the shelter of nearby trees, and there was Evan near the gift shop! Perhaps he hadn't wanted to visit downtown Cancun alone, she thought. Still, he could have joined his co-workers from the computer company. He'd all but abandoned them on the trip lately.

Hours later, after she'd fallen asleep again, Evan tapped her shoulder. "Your back is burning."

She blinked groggily. "I thought you were going downtown."

"Changed my mind," he explained. "We can go tonight before dinner. There are supposed to be some good restaurants and nightclubs. . . ."

How could she possibly refuse him now? It was her own fault for not immediately rejecting his offer of dinner. She could imagine Gayle lecturing her with, "You shouldn't always be so sweet. Sometimes you just have to be firm."

"It's almost five o'clock," Evan said. "Why don't we get ready now?"

She grabbed a deep breath and sat up. How could she still be so tired after resting all afternoon? It wasn't just exhaustion — perhaps it was the humidity as Evan had suggested, but she ached all over too. She'd have to take aspirins in her room.

"Shall we get ready now?" Evan asked again.

"Fine." She suddenly smelled the scent of liquor on his breath.

As Evan helped her out of their taxi in downtown Cancun, Paula was aware of his admiration. Her filmy white dress with its V-neck, long bell sleeves, and full skirt would be flattering to anyone, especially contrasted against a suntan. Evan looked very nice himself in a tan blazer and brown slacks.

He took her arm, and they ambled along the sidewalk, looking at the endless array of shops which offered Yucatec wares — temple rubbings, hand-painted pottery, coral jewelry, tortoiseshell combs, straw hats, and embroidered white clothing — not to mention goods from the rest of Mexico. Men, women, and children vendors bargained with gusto among the tourists.

Passing a colorful stall, Paula's eyes were attracted to the coral jewelry.

"Come in, come in, señorita!" the vendor urged.

"Only to look?" she inquired.

"Only to look, señorita," he replied, quickly placing the jewelry at her fingertips. "You like the black from Cozumel or the pink coral?"

"Pink," she answered. She held the earrings to her ears. The price was less than she'd expected. . . .

"We'll take them," Evan said to the vendor, reaching into his jacket pocket for his wallet.

"No — I couldn't possibly let you buy them for me," Paula protested.

Evan was already counting bills out onto the counter. "I *want* to buy them for you." His glance made it clear that he'd feel rejected if she refused him.

The smiling vendor was already accepting the money, and there seemed nothing she could do but to thank Evan and to pay him later.

She slipped on the coral earrings.

"I'll help you with the necklace," Evan said, taking it from the counter and trying to fasten it, his fingers trembling at the nape of her neck. Finally it was fastened, and he stood back to admire her.

She looked at her image in the small mirror on the counter. The coral did look lovely with her blond hair and white dress. "It's beautiful. Thank you, Evan."

His brown eyes were so soft with pleasure that she was glad she'd given in. "You look beautiful," he said proudly. "The most beautiful woman in Cancun."

"It's sweet of you to say so, but I doubt that. I'm not half as beautiful as Vanessa, for example."

"She's not even in your class," he countered. "She looks callous and

tough like . . ."

For an instant Paula thought he was going to mention his ex-wife, but he steered her by the elbow instead. "Come on, let's have a drink. We still have an hour until dinner."

Paula shivered, though it had nothing to do with his comment, and the air was still quite warm.

At the restaurant where Evan had made reservations, he checked in with the maître d', who ushered them to the bar. Sitting down, Paula ordered a lemonade. She'd have to take more aspirins for the headache lurking behind her eyes.

Evan ordered a frothy margarita.

When they were served, he offered a drink from his enormous goblet, its rim edged with salt. "Are you sure you won't try it?"

"No, thanks." She sipped at her lemonade and swallowed the aspirins.

He shrugged and took a long swallow. "Don't you ever drink?"

She shook her head. "I don't care for it." She could have fun without it, she reasoned, although that was the last thing to say now to Evan.

After a few minutes, the maître d' stepped into the bar. "Walker? We have a cancellation if you'd like a table now."

Evan turned to her. "Do you want to eat early?"

"Yes, let's eat now." She wasn't hungry, only so weary that she was anxious to be done with dinner and return to the hotel. What was wrong with her? she fretted, barely able to stand up. She'd never been so tired in her life. She shivered again, attributing it to the air-conditioning.

Inside the restaurant the air was redolent with the scents of broiling meats, but the smells made her nauseous. It seemed forever until their waiter brought the crab hors d'oeuvres, then another eternity until their lobster tail and Mayan steak were presented — the steak in a flaming dish. Food would make her feel better, she told herself. But, delicious as it was, it didn't seem to help. If anything, she felt worse.

By the time dinner was over, she was shivering violently. "Would you mind terribly taking me back to the hotel now, Evan?"

Evan set down his after-dinner liqueur in annoyance. *"Now?"*

"I don't feel well," Paula explained. She touched the back of her hand to her forehead. It was terribly hot.

"But I was hoping to hit some of the nightclubs. There are supposed to be some real live ones. . . ."

"I'm sorry." She couldn't think of anything she'd less like to do. "I don't mind taking a taxi back by myself if you want to stay here."

He glowered at her, then asked for the bill.

Outside the restaurant Evan fumed. "I think I know what your game

is. You think that men are free meal tickets —"

"I'm not playing games!" she interrupted. She stepped out to the curb to wave down a taxi. If that's what he thought, she'd much rather go back to the hotel alone. "If you're one of those men who think I owe you something for a dinner, you'll have my money for it — and for the coral jewelry! I'll pay you tomorrow morning when I don't feel like fainting!"

"Listen, Paula . . ."

"I'm sorry I'm being so unpleasant, but I feel very sick!" she explained plaintively, shivering all over.

"Let's just calm down," he suggested, trying to pull her back from the curb.

She twisted away from him, watching for cabs. Two were coming down the street; the first was crowded, but the second cab's overhead light glowed, and she flagged it. "Thanks for a nice dinner, Evan."

He opened the taxi door, helped her in, and climbed in behind her. "Look, I'm sorry if you don't feel well."

She rested her aching head in her hands, too miserable to talk as chills swept through her again and again. He finally seemed to realize that she wasn't acting, but she could scarcely make out his apology. The taxi ride through the dark island with its distant, lighted hotels seemed interminable.

Finally they pulled in at El Pyramide, but she was so weak and feverish that she could scarcely step out of the taxi. Shapes floated, dimmed, then swam into focus.

Evan looked at her in the light of the hotel portecochere. "You do look terrible. Here, let me help you."

Leaning on him, she knew that she'd never make it in. They were through the entry doors and in the lobby. Suddenly everything swirled and her body sagged against Evan. She heard him shouting, "Someone, give me a hand!"

When she opened her eyes, everything whirled. Finally she realized she was in bed in her room. Shapes floated before her. After a long while she saw a familiar young man leaning over her and a middle-aged Mexican man wearing a stethoscope around his neck. "I called the hotel doctor," the young man explained.

She attempted to focus on the Mexican's face. A doctor, the other man said.

"Not to worry," the doctor said, his voice seeming to come from a long distance. "I will make you well."

She shivered convulsively. How could her body be so icy cold when her head was burning with fever?

"It's the mosquito bites. Your husband says you have been in Merida."

Her husband? Matt? she wondered. Or was it Tony? But here was . . .? Evan?

"Do you ache?" the doctor inquired.

"Yes," she managed, her teeth chattering. She had never ached so in all of her life. It felt as if her bones were bruising her flesh. Things began to come into focus. "I thought it was from climbing the pyramids."

The doctor explained, "It appears that you have denge fever. It is transmitted by the mosquito, like yellow fever and malaria, but not so bad."

"Bad enough!" she muttered through chattering teeth.

"Not to worry," the doctor's voice said, though the words seemed unsynchronized to his lips. "You will feel better after these shots. One is for fever, one antibiotic . . ."

She watched him lift the bedsheet and saw she was wearing only her slip and underwear. Who had undressed her? She ached so hideously that she was only vaguely aware of one shot in her arm, then another.

"It is all over," the doctor stated. "I will leave a prescription for more medicine." He covered her with the sheet again. "You will sleep now," he said in a hypnotic tone. "You will sleep now."

The tenseness drained from her body and, in minutes, she felt warm. The chills were gone. What had he given her to make even her feet and fingers so warm now? She had to strain for his parting words.

"Vaya con Dios."

Surely he didn't mean that she was dying, she thought. *Vaya con Dios* meant "Go with God!"

9

When Paula opened her eyes the next morning, she was perplexed by the white, blue, and green room. She lay in a large bed, and across from her in another bed, a red curly-haired head raised up. "Are you feeling better?" Gayle asked.

It took Paula another moment to realize where she was. "Was there a doctor here last night?"

Gayle sat up in her bed. "There certainly was."

"Everything seems so vague, so fragmented."

"I'm not surprised," Gayle replied. "Evan said you collapsed in the lobby and one of the bellboys helped him get you upstairs. They called the hotel doctor. You're apparently a very sick girl."

"I feel weak," she said. She didn't even feel like sitting up. "But I don't ache as badly as last night."

Gayle slipped out of bed and placed her hand on Paula's forehead. "You don't feel quite as feverish now. The doctor's going to stop by again this afternoon. He thinks you have denge fever from those mosquito bites."

"He's stopping by this afternoon?" That was impossible. "I can't miss the side trip to Tulum," she protested groggily. "I need to take notes. . . ."

"That's the last thing to worry about. Anyhow Matt says you're probably set for the first two articles."

Then Matt knew she was sick too.

"I'm sure that the *Santa Rosita Times* can exist for another twenty or so years without your articles on Cancun and environs," Gayle said with a twinkle in her green eyes.

"I guess it will," Paula admitted with a twinge of amusement. "When am I supposed to start feeling better?"

"Three or four days."

How slowly her mind worked this morning. "What is today?"

"Thursday."

Thursday to Saturday — "That's only *two* days! Saturday we fly home!"

Gayle walked to the window and drew the draperies, letting the

morning sunshine flood the room. "You're not to worry about anything. If you're not well enough to fly home, I'll stay with you."

"But you'd lose your tour fare on the plane," Paula objected. "And it would cost you a fortune extra for this room too."

Gayle crossed her arms in a show of firmness. "One of us will be here with you. Matt may stay on to take more pictures, then maybe join Vanessa at Cozumel."

Paula swallowed hard.

"Don't worry," Gayle smiled. "Knowing you, you'll be better in no time. And, if you're not, one of us will stay."

"You can't stay, Gayle."

"You'd do it for me, wouldn't you?"

Paula nodded, her eyes drifting closed. Later, as she wandered in and out of sleep, she wasn't certain whether she'd merely thought or said, "That's what friends are for."

As for friends, she would not count on Matt — or was it Tony? Their images merged in her consciousness, Matt's face sliding over Tony's, then back again until their features were jumbled, confused beyond recognition — Matt suddenly with black hair. Tony with blond. She couldn't depend on either of them, she told herself, but she could depend on Gayle. Yet Gayle didn't have that much money for extra plane fare and the room; she was saving for her wedding.

At noon Paula awakened again. She noticed that Gayle wore a pale green sundress as if ready to go somewhere.

"I'll order consommé for you from room service," Gayle said with a reassuring smile. "You'll be better in no time."

"You've missed your trip to Tulum. I don't want to ruin the rest of the tour for you!"

Gayle shook her red curls and smiled fondly. "You couldn't ruin anything if you tried."

Oh, yes, she could, Paula fretted. She had ruined everything with the men she'd loved, and now she was depriving Gayle and Josh of this trip to Tulum. It was supposed to be a spectacular Mayan ruin, the only one by the sea. "I'll be fine," she insisted. "This isn't fair to Josh." She managed to pull herself into a sitting position. "You and Josh could still go."

Gayle glanced at her watch. "He's checked into renting a car just in case you'd feel better."

"I'm much much better," Paula insisted, mincing the truth. "If you'll just call room service for the consommé —" Inspiration hit. "— and a ham sandwich."

"A ham sandwich!" Gayle repeated. "You *must* be feeling better!"

Paula forced a smile. "You know I never get terribly sick. I probably have a lot more resistance than the doctor thought."

Gayle looked at her doubtfully as she lifted the phone to her ear. After calling room service, she telephoned Josh. "Paula says she feels better. She wants us to go to Tulum." Her voice held a note of dubiousness, but evidently Josh was urging her to go too. When she hung up, she turned again to Paula. "Are you sure you'll be fine?"

"Of course!"

"Evan said he'd hang around too," Gayle said. "Well, I'll wait until room service arrives."

It was all Paula could do to maintain her pretense. As for Evan staying around — she saw no reason why he should unless he somehow felt guilty for not bringing her home sooner. What a spectacle she must have made of herself — collapsing in the hotel lobby! Evan had probably been embarrassed.

After room service delivered her lunch, Paula sniffed at the cup of hot beef consommé. It smelled good. She managed to drink it and to nibble away half of the ham sandwich. "I'll save the rest for later," she said, reaching for her paperback novel. "I think I'll read."

"Are you sure?" Gayle asked, looking more and more hopeful.

"Of course! Go and have a good time. You can report it all to me."

Before she left Gayle said, "There are all kinds of juices in our room refrigerator. The doctor says you're to drink lots of liquids. Soft drinks are fine too."

Refrigerator? Paula reflected. Of course, the small hotel refrigerator up in the dining area. She'd seen nuts and other snacks in it too, though it was mostly filled with liquor.

As soon as her roommate departed, Paula sank back down under the covers and fell immediately asleep.

When she awakened again, it was late afternoon. She found Evan standing at her bedside, smiling down at her beside the doctor. How did they get in? Upon reflection, she supposed that the hotel would furnish its doctor with a key. The doctor, whose name she'd already forgotten, asked her questions, and she must have answered because the next time she awakened, he was gone. She had the vague impression that Evan was sitting in the raised dining area by the window, but her eyes fell shut again. In the evening she briefly glimpsed Gayle and Josh — and was that Matt? — in the room.

On Friday morning she insisted that Gayle take the day's trip to Isla Mujeres. "You've already paid for it!" Paula reasoned. She pretended again that she was well before her roommate would go. Once, when awakening, she recalled it was Friday. Tomorrow morning they would be flying home. She had to be well!

When she awakened in the late afternoon, Vanessa stood beside the bed, shaking Paula's shoulder none too gently.

For a moment Paula surmised she was dreaming again. But it was

definitely Vanessa and she looked furious.

"I'm not sure whether this is an act you're playing or not," Vanessa began, her voice trembling with fury, "but just because Matt is staying here with you instead of going to Cozumel —"

"Matt's staying on?"

"Spare me your sweet innocence!" Vanessa flared.

"But —"

"Just because he's staying with you, don't suppose it means anything," Vanessa fumed. "After all, I'm the one who taught him everything he knows about women. I know Matt *very well.*"

This was another nightmare! Paula decided. But, no, Vanessa's heavy perfume filled the room. Her amber eyes flashed with anger. How could such a beautiful woman possibly be jealous of her?

"As for Matt having the adjoining room and a key . . .," Vanessa began.

Matt had a key to her room? Did she mean Evan? She had the vague impression that Evan was hovering in the hallway by the door.

"Matt's been in love with me since we were kids," Vanessa continued. "He's taking me to the airport in a few minutes."

Paula blinked in confusion. "Why doesn't he go with you to Cozumel if he's in love with you?"

"Because of you pretending to be sick!" Vanessa exploded, turning on her heel and leaving the room. The door slammed behind her.

The episode became part of a nightmare. Matt and Vanessa were in high school again, walking home holding hands — Matt and Vanessa . . . always Matt and Vanessa.

When she awakened again, it was evening, and there was no one in the room. She had to get up and pack, she thought, dragging herself upright and sitting on the edge of the bed. Finally she stood up. It would be so good to be home in her own bed; she should never have come. Her suitcase lay open on a luggage rack, and she remembered that she had hardly unpacked; there was very little to do but repack her bathing suit and sundress and the white dress she had worn to dinner with Evan. A shower would make her feel better.

In the shower, the spray of hot water stung her body, then she switched on the cold. She must be well for tomorrow; she must go home! When she stepped out into the steamy bathroom, it sounded as if someone opened the door to the room. Slipping into her white terry-cloth robe she called out, "Is that you, Gayle?"

No one answered.

She zipped up her robe and opened the bathroom door. No one was in the room. Folding her unpacked clothing, she soon found herself exhausted. She'd lie down for just a moment.

When she opened her eyes again, Evan was sitting across the room in

the dining area by the window, a paperback novel in hand. Apparently aware of her awakening, he set the book on the table near the empty liquor bottles. He was now drinking what appeared to be red wine.

"How did you get in here?" she asked sleepily, pulling up the covers to her neck as she sat up. Perhaps it was thoughtful of him to sit with her, but it made her feel uneasy.

Instead of answering he replied, "You must be feeling better. You showered."

How did he know? Unless — unless he'd come in while she was in the shower, when she thought she'd heard the door. It crossed her mind that he must have a key. Could it be from the night when she had fainted in the lobby? The doctor had thought Evan was her husband; perhaps a desk clerk had assumed so too. Or perhaps he'd automatically handed out a key during the excitement and had forgotten about it.

Evan leaned back in his chair, observing her closely. "I think that you feel a lot better than you let on."

"Why on earth would you say that?" she inquired, thinking she heard a door close in Matt's room. If only Matt would come to check on her!

Evan raised his eyebrows. "Isn't — isn't it true?"

"It's most certainly not true that I'm pretending! Why should I?"

He drained his wineglass before answering. "Maybe because you want Matt to stay alone with you here."

"What a thing to say!" Had Evan been drinking even before he arrived in her room? If so, he'd had quite a lot. "Do you think it's fun for me to miss all of the trips — not to mention my note-taking?"

He stared at her. "Don't think you fool me! You've always been in love with that stupid Matt Montgomery! Everyone in Santa Rosita knows it except him!"

She closed her eyes in resignation. Had she been that obvious? She managed, "I appreciate your concern, Evan, but if you'd leave now . . ."

"I'm not leaving," he contended, sitting back comfortably. He filled his wine glass again, rambling on about how he'd given up his afternoon to keep an eye on her.

How slurred his words were becoming! Of course, he was drunk — he'd said his ex-wife had a drinking problem. Why hadn't she guessed that he did too?

Paula spoke as evenly as possible. "This *is* my room, Evan. I didn't invite you in, and I didn't want you to sit here all afternoon. If you don't mind, I'd like some privacy now. I'd like you to leave."

"To leave!" he flared. "After all of my trouble . . ."

The thing to do was to firmly usher him out, she told herself. Aware that she still wore her white terrycloth robe, she stood up weakly.

"Evan, if you don't leave, I'll call the desk clerk." The growing anger on Evan's face stopped her.

She hardly knew what to do as he came to his feet. He was turning redder and redder. "Evan —?"

"Tease!" he shouted.

Paula reached for the telephone on the nightstand as he stepped down from the dining area. As she pressed the button for the hotel operator, Evan strode across the room.

"Operator . . .," a voice responded.

Fury boiled in Evan's bloodshot eyes. There was no time to explain anything to the operator, to anyone. As Evan vaulted across Gayle's bed toward her Paula shouted, "Matt Montgomery's room!" Dropping the phone, she ran between the beds to escape out the door but Evan grabbed her shoulder, twisting her to him.

"Leave me alone!" she cried out. "You're hurting me!"

His eyes glittered vengefully before he crushed her against his chest. "I'm not leaving you alone anymore! I'm tired — tired of being a gentleman! What you need is someone — someone who knows how to love a woman —"

Struggling, she cried out, "Matt!"

Evan slapped her face hard.

"Matt!" she screamed again hopelessly, remembering he'd taken Vanessa to the airport. She grappled with Evan, but he was amazingly strong. "Matt! Help me!"

The adjoining door burst open, and Matt rushed in, towering over them as he tore Evan away. "Get out of here!" he shouted, grabbing the shorter man with such fury that Evan's brown eyes bulged.

Evan broke away and aimed a punch at Matt's chin, but missed, and Matt twisted Evan's arms behind him. "Don't you ever go near Paula again!" He was furious.

Paula thought this must be another of her dreams! Now Matt was wrestling Evan out of the room. It occurred to her — "Evan has my room key!"

When Matt returned, he shut the door behind him, locking it and breathing hard. Darting a glance at her, he placed Evan's key on the dresser. "He doesn't have it anymore." As he turned to her, his face was full of concern. "Are you all right now?"

She realized that she was trembling with shock. "If you hadn't been there! If you hadn't come!" Maybe Matt thought it was all her fault. "Truly, I didn't encourage him!"

Quite suddenly she was sobbing, and Matt caught her in a protective embrace. "It's all right, Paula. It's all right," he repeated over and over. After a while, he patted her back as if she were a little girl.

It reminded her of when she was a child and had skinned her knee

while he babysat her. Nothing had changed!

"He won't bother you any more. They'll all be leaving tomorrow," Matt assured her.

"I thought you'd taken Vanessa to the airport . . . that you weren't back," Paula sobbed.

"She took a taxi," he said, stroking her hair softly. "It's all right now."

Slowly she felt her body relaxing. Finally she caught her breath and sat on the edge of the bed, certain she hadn't cried as much as this last week in all of her life. How could everything have gone so wrong?

Matt felt her forehead. "Has the doctor been here today?"

She shook her head.

"I think I'd better call him. You get into bed."

"He thought that Evan was my — my husband," Paula remembered as she slipped into her bed.

"That's one mistake he won't make again!" Matt said with vehemence. After a moment he added, "Try to sleep. I'll leave the door between our rooms open. Gayle got me a key for when they're all gone. I hope you don't mind."

"I trust you," she said quite simply.

He gave her a slow grin. "Thanks. I suppose that's a compliment."

"It is," she acknowledged, though she didn't trust him in all respects. She was certain he wouldn't abuse her physically, but she didn't trust him with her heart anymore.

When the doctor arrived, Matt answered the door and spoke to him in the hallway for a few moments.

"Here's the doctor," he said, then retreated to his own room.

The doctor appeared a bit perplexed, but after examining her said, "One more shot. It will make you very sleepy. You must rest and not overexert yourself."

She nodded. Why bother explaining that she'd overexerted herself to fight off Evan? It was all too complicated. She was nearly asleep when the doctor departed. The last thing she saw was Matt's concerned face.

"Should I leave the adjoining door open until Gayle comes back?" he asked.

Paula nodded groggily.

Dozing off, she dreamed of the time she had brought him the roses. How handsome he was with his sunstreaked blond hair. He was gazing at the roses in astonishment. "Hasn't anyone ever given you flowers?" she asked as if it were an everyday event for her to bring roses to a man. She smiled up at him and, for a wondrous moment, they were encircled by the fragrance of the roses and the warmth of the sunshine shimmering through the trees.

"Not anyone so beautiful," he had said.

10

Gayle struggled to shut her suitcase on the pale green carpeting. "Just consider your staying on as an added vacation," she suggested to Paula. "It'll only be four or five days."

"A blessing in disguise?" Paula asked ruefully as she sat on the edge of her bed in her blue nightie and peignoir.

She wished that she were more like Gayle, accepting the aggravations of life more gracefully. As for additional vacation, the extra cost of the hotel and airfare would finish her savings entirely. Moreover, there was nothing holidaylike about staying behind with Matt. Last night after so furiously evicting Evan, Matt had conducted himself as if she were still the little girl next door. He'd soothed and consoled her, but evidently there'd been no romance for him in embracing her now.

So far, nothing about denge fever vaguely resembled a blessing. This morning she had managed to brush her teeth and shower, but still didn't have the energy to get dressed. The only good thing that came to mind was that Evan was leaving this morning with the rest of the Santa Rosita group.

She watched Gayle wrestle with her suitcase and finally had to smile. Between Gayle's clothing and her purchases, there seemed little hope of holding the suitcase shut. "I'll sit on it for you," Paula offered. "It's not the first time."

"Super!" Gayle gave the contents a final shove away from the edges. "Ready?"

The moment the lid was down, Paula sat on it.

"Voilà!" Gayle exclaimed, snapping shut the locks.

Josh knocked at their adjoining door. "Are you two decent?" he asked.

"Maybe not decent, but dressed," Gayle laughed, inserting the key into the suitcase locks. "You can come in."

"So that's how you get it shut," Josh chuckled as he walked in. He dropped a kiss on Gayle's forehead. "I'll put the suitcase out in the hallway for you. Are you set to go down to breakfast?"

"Could I meet you down in the coffee shop in a few minutes?" Gayle suggested. "I'm not quite ready."

"Sure," Josh answered good-naturedly, and Paula wished again that she had such a comfortable relationship with a man who loved her.

As Josh carried out the suitcase, he called back to Paula, "If I don't see you until we're back in Santa Rosita, take care of yourself. We'll be at the airport to pick you up."

"Thanks so much, Josh," Paula responded gratefully.

"Our pleasure," he replied.

When he was gone Paula turned to Gayle. "Do you have any idea of how lucky you are to have someone like Josh?"

Gayle shook her auburn curls as she packed her carry-on case and a white plastic bagful of purchases. "Luck has nothing to do with it. Josh is an out-and-out blessing from the Lord."

"You believe that, don't you?" Paula inquired.

"I sure do. I prayed for someone like Josh, and not two days later, there he was at a church dinner with his parents. He thought he was there to hear the speaker, but the Lord wanted us to meet. Josh thinks so too in retrospect.

Paula sank dejectedly on her bed. "I prayed too, Gayle," she began. "I prayed in a little church in Piste, and here's what happened: first, I got denge fever, and then Evan attacked me!" She didn't even want to mention the worst — that Vanessa had taken over Matt.

Gayle paused in her packing. "Surely you don't think that God made you sick or caused Evan to attack you?"

"I don't know. . . ."

"Honey, the reason you have trouble understanding is that you've never committed yourself unreservedly to Jesus. And I do mean *unreservedly*. Sure, you used to go to church, but you just tiptoed around the edges of faith. It's not enough to believe now and then, or just when you're in trouble. . . ."

"And have you committed yourself so unreservedly?" Paula returned with annoyance.

Gayle nodded solemnly. "Yes. When my father died and I didn't care about even living anymore . . . when it didn't seem possible for us to go on without him, I finally gave my entire life over to Jesus — and I've never regretted it."

"I'm sorry . . . I didn't realize . . .," Paula began, remembering so many years ago when Gayle's father had died of a sudden heart attack. He had been the light of her life, beloved by the whole community. "I suppose I'd have been furious with God."

"Oh, I was at first! I was especially mad because Dad had been such a great believer. I kept saying, 'It's not fair, God! It's not fair!' "

"Well, it wasn't fair, Gayle!"

"No one has ever promised us that life would be fair . . . or what we might think is fair. But what I eventually discovered through all of it

was that God gives us the strength to handle anything that can happen to us. I lean very heavily on Philippians 4:13 . . . *I can do all things through Christ, who strengtheneth me.*"

"I see," Paula said, although she was not certain that she did. Strange that they'd known each other so well for all of these years, and she'd never understood how her best friend had arrived at her faith.

Gayle glanced at her watch. "I'd better run. But I do want to assure you that God did not send a mosquito after you! And He didn't send Evan after you either!" She gave Paula a big hug. "God is all good . . . He's love . . . He loves you even more than I do!"

Before Paula could answer, her roommate rushed for the door. "See you at the airport!"

"Tell everyone good-bye for me!" Paula called after her.

Climbing back into bed, she felt slightly miffed about their religious discussion, but then she *had* been curious.

At noon there was a knock on the connecting door. "It's Matt," he said. "May I come in?"

Paula tugged up the covers. "Come in." Fortunately, the maid had already changed Gayle's bed and cleaned the room.

He looked a trifle embarrassed. "If I'd knocked on the front door you'd have had to get up."

"It's all right," she assured him. "I feel very bad about your staying here with me though."

"Nonsense," he protested with a bright smile. "I wanted to get more pictures of Cancun anyhow. The tour went far too rapidly to really get enough good shots."

Paula returned his smile. "Then I don't have to feel guilty?"

"You don't have to feel guilty." He glanced around the room, then apparently decided it was suitable to sit on the edge of Gayle's bed. "I'm a little uneasy about leaving you alone after last night. I thought you might be nervous. . . ."

"Nervous?" Could that be why he'd treated her so carefully last night, why her being in his arms had been no more than a protective embrace? An appalling idea flashed to mind. "Didn't Evan leave with the others?"

"He's gone," Matt assured her. "I went downstairs to see everyone off this morning."

She felt relieved, then a twinge of gratefulness that the trip wasn't over for her too. Maybe . . . No, she didn't want to even hope. . . . "I don't want you sitting around in your room. . . ."

"You need peace of mind, a feeling of security while you rest," he responded.

"It's thoughtful of you, Matt, and I'm thankful you're staying on,

but I don't want you to sit around nearby all day because of me."

"Oh, I've been busy," he insisted. "I jogged along the beach this morning before everyone left and took some wonderful pictures of daybreak. Besides the dawn shots over the Caribbean, I got some of colorful little tropical birds along the beaches."

"Sounds lovely," she replied, aware that he was trying to sidetrack her objection. "But the fact remains that since everyone left, you've been sitting in your room — babysitting me again! I don't have a fever this morning, and I'll probably sleep this afternoon. If you sit around anymore, I *will* feel guilty."

He laughed. "I've never been known for being too idle. I've been researching the area to see where I might want to take pictures." He glanced toward her stack of folders and brochures on the dresser. "Do you suppose I might borrow some of your material?"

"Certainly. But you're not allowed to feel responsible for me now. No one's going to break in, and according to the doctor, I'm not apt to die of this."

"I know," he admitted, "but I feel like we're — we're old friends."

"Thanks." She remembered their passionate kisses. Those moments she'd considered rapture he'd apparently considered being old friends!

"Why don't I call room service to bring up some lunch for us?" he suggested.

"I absolutely refuse to allow you to have lunch here."

He finally gave in, but was adamant about dinner. "We'll have the best dinner in the house sent up," he promised. "Sleep and get well!"

"I will," Paula replied, and moments after he'd left the room, she slept.

At four-thirty she awakened, feeling strong enough to wash her hair and change into her new hand-embroidered cotton caftan. Later, when she examined herself in the mirror, her blond hair gleamed, and her eyes were bright with excitement instead of fever.

At six o'clock Matt knocked at their adjoining door.

"Come in!" she called from the dining area where she was reading. It seemed the only decorous place in the room to meet him.

"You're up!" he remarked. "And looking so much better."

For an instant she remembered that morning in the Merida hotel room when he'd come into her room behind the bellboy. What was it Matt had told her? Something about never letting a man into her room again, and then *he'd* swept her into his arms. The memory made her blush.

"You're not feverish again?" he inquired.

She placed a hand on her forehead. It was warm, normal. "I'm fine," she answered. Only foolish to dwell on memories. He was

probably anxious to join Vanessa!

"When are you leaving for Cozumel?" she asked.

"I don't know. It depends."

Depends on what? she wondered.

Matt telephoned in their dinner order from the room service menu: cream of asparagus soup, salads, Mayan steaks, and flan. Ordering steaks reminded Paula of the dinner she'd eaten in downtown Cancun with Evan — the steaks arriving in ceremonial flames at their elegant table and the evening ending in ashes with her collapse in the lobby.

After a time, the room service waiter arrived without ceremony or flames; he lighted the dining area's chandelier with a flip of the electric switch, set the table with white linen tablecloth and napkins, served their dinner, and discreetly disappeared.

Evening was falling as Matt seated her. He sat down across the table, and she turned nervously to the cream of asparagus soup.

"It's full of fresh asparagus, the way I make it," Matt commented.

"You make asparagus soup?" Paula returned in amazement. "I thought you weren't domestic."

"Now where did you get that idea?" he asked.

"At Gayle's house, the night she and Josh prepared dinner."

Matt chuckled at the memory. "Josh and I just like to give each other a bad time. I'm a fairly decent cook."

"I can't believe it!"

He seemed taken aback at her astonishment. "It's not nearly as wonderful as advertised to eat in restaurants all of the time. I've been living alone for nearly eight years now, since I moved into my first apartment."

Living alone? She'd supposed that he hadn't lived alone at all.

"You didn't think that I'd eaten in restaurants all eight years?" he asked.

"I guess I'd never thought about it quite like that."

She did know that Tony would never stoop to cooking. Although he'd never admitted it, he'd clearly considered cooking to be "women's work." As for cleaning up, he'd made a big show of how liberated he was by carrying his dishes to the kitchen sink, then quickly exiting.

"Have you ever eaten in a restaurant alone?" Matt asked.

"No . . . not in an elegant restaurant."

He sighed. "The sympathetic stares are enough to lay you low."

"I suppose they would." She'd assumed that he lived a glamorous life in a whirl of nightclubs and restaurants. Hadn't his own mother called him a playboy?

"It's honey celery seed," Matt said.

"Honey celery seed?" she inquired, then realized he was talking about the salad dressing. She tasted the slightly sweet dressing, dubbed

a house specialty by the hotel menu. "You do know," she responded, trying to pretend that they weren't in her bedroom. The setting made her nervous.

Finally she said into the awkward silence, "I'm having such a difficult time believing that you actually cook, though I suppose you learned to make hot dogs and hamburgers in your scouting days."

His blue eyes held hers with a heart-stopping intensity. "I'm not a scout anymore, Paula."

She was so disconcerted by his gaze that she only said, "I know." His kisses made that quite clear. From the warmth in his eyes it occurred to her that he might be remembering too.

She decided to shift their conversation to safer ground. "Wouldn't our parents enjoy being here?"

He shook his head. "Mine don't especially like to travel. Dad was in Europe during World War II, and he vowed that if he came home alive he'd never leave California again. I don't think he has. Yet, as you know, they've probably explored every beach, lake, and mountain in the state."

"Strange. And our generation is so wild to see the world." She wondered if Matt's father had made a vow to God about coming home alive. The Montgomerys had long attended the same neighborhood church that her own parents had recently joined. As for traveling, her mother and father enjoyed it occasionally, but it wasn't the most important interest in their lives.

"You don't much like men, do you?" Matt suddenly asked.

"Why I — Of course I do!" What made him ask that? Did it have to do with Evan last night, or did he know about Tony? Still, she liked men very well, she reassured herself before an inner voice asked, *"But do you trust them?"*

"Josh said that you walked out of a difficult situation when you left Phoenix."

"Yes," she replied hesitantly. "Yes, I did."

"It seems that we all do at one time or another," he said rather stiffly.

"I suppose so," she agreed, looking at her plate. No doubt he referred to Vanessa walking out on him years ago as well.

Paula cut into her tender steak with its mushrooms, peppers, and onions, and put a forkful in her mouth. Barely aware of its delectable flavor, she stared blindly at the rice, black beans, and cheese-topped baked tomato on the plate. At last she spoke again to fill the silence. "Now don't tell me you make Mayan steak."

He chuckled. "Not yet."

The conversation became more comfortable as they turned to their childhood memories of Santa Rosita. After a while Paula found herself

saying, "I remember when Gayle and I ran after you on your bicycle when you delivered the *Santa Rosita Times*. You must have detested us."

"Not so much," he replied. "I wasn't smart enough to know a good thing when I saw it."

She laughed. "You were smart enough to avoid us as much as possible!"

Tasting her flan, a delicious custardy dessert with brown sugar, she looked out the window at the lighted swimming pool and the hotel grounds; beyond, the sandy beaches and the blue sea were almost lost in the night. Above her, the chandelier turned the dining area into an island of light — and her bedroom to their side, like the sea, nearly disappeared in the semidarkness. Nearly, but not quite. She sat back after she'd finished her flan, unsure of what to do.

Matt rose from the table, smiling at her. "I'd better let you get your rest. You still look pale under that tan."

She stood up. "Maybe I'll read for a while. Gayle bought me a new paperback. . . ."

Matt started for the connecting door to his room, and she trailed after him uneasily. "Shall I leave the door unlocked in case you feel bad in the night?" he offered.

"Oh, no!" she replied far too quickly. "I'll be just fine." She suspected that he was hiding a smile. "Thank you for a lovely dinner, Matt."

"My pleasure. Maybe tomorrow you can lie out by the pool. And, just in case you make a miraculous recovery, I've made reservations for us at The Yucatecan, the best restaurant in the hotel."

"But —"

"But nothing," he protested. "You'll only be allowed to go if you're feeling much better. It's supposed to be an incentive."

"Thanks, Matt," she replied.

"Good night, Paula." His blue eyes moved quickly away from hers.

"Good night." She watched the door close behind him and was glad to hear him turn the key in the lock. He could just as easily unlock it, but she knew that he wouldn't unless she called him.

The next day Matt refused to leave her. As they found chaise lounges out by the hotel pool he said, "I'm feeling too lazy today. Besides you'll be up and around by tomorrow. The doctor said three or four more days. Just look at how much you've improved already."

"I do feel better," she admitted, taking off her white terrycloth beach cover-up.

She lay down on the chaise in her one-piece blue bathing suit, aware

that Matt was admiring her trim figure. It occurred to her that the last time he'd seen her in a bathing suit was two weeks ago at the neighborhood pool. How long ago that seemed now.

He settled on the adjacent lounge. "If you're feeling well enough tomorrow, I thought we might go to Tulum. I can rent a car, and it's an easy drive. There's a national park nearby too that we're not supposed to miss. Xel-ha."

She slathered herself with suntan lotion, wondering if he wasn't more anxious to join Vanessa in Cozumel. "But it's not fair to you to have to stay just because I'm ill."

"If you syndicate the first two travel articles, the one on Cancun and the surrounding area will be in demand. It's a natural follow-up."

"I suppose so, though I'll never get rich on that!"

"I wouldn't mind the travel credits for my pictures if you get the article syndicated all over the country," he remarked. "It would make my travel books more attractive to prospective publishers if I had a number of newspaper credits."

He seemed serious about it, and she did want to go.

The mid-morning sunshine beamed all around them and soft music swirled across the pool from the thatch-roofed refreshment bar. A sense of well-being swept through her, and she turned to him with a hopeless smile. "You're very convincing."

"I'd hoped so," he said. "You'll go?"

She wished that he hadn't donned his dark glasses so that she might see the look in those blue eyes. Yet she rather enjoyed the sense of mystery the sunglasses imparted. "I'll go," she replied.

At one o'clock, they ambled to the outdoor dining room overlooking the turquoise sea. Sitting at a narrow table, she felt the balmy air soothe away her sense of caution. She felt more and more drawn to him as they sat eating chef's salads and listening to the sounds of the waves curling to the white sandy beach.

"Time for your nap," he said after lunch. "I'll go upstairs with you. I have to make a call."

She thought nothing of it.

On the crowded hotel elevator, someone jostled her against Matt, and she felt an electrifying attraction to him. Looking up, she realized he was aware of the magnetism between them too. If only Vanessa hadn't walked back into his life!

They were strangely silent walking to her room. At her door Matt turned to her uneasily. "Try to rest. I'll pick you up at six for dinner."

"Fine —"

"Paula . . .?" His low voice was husky with emotion.

Down the corridor, a door closed and an elderly couple started toward them.

"Yes?"

"Nothing," he replied. "Only wear a pretty dress."

She was fairly certain that he'd had *something* in mind before the couple appeared on the scene. She unlocked her door and darted a shy smile at him. "I will."

Minutes before six o'clock, Paula waited in her room. She'd slept for two hours and was rested, but now she brimmed with anticipation. She examined herself in the full-length mirror. Her deep blue dress with its diaphanous pleated bell sleeves and overskirt was the prettiest she'd ever owned; its V-neck was demure yet enchanting. It looked like a dress for dancing on a moonlit terrace. In the mirror, her face glowed; her eyes were clear again, bluer than ever.

At six, Matt knocked at the corridor door. When she opened it, his eyes widened with appreciation. "You're certainly wearing something pretty," he observed.

"Thank you," she laughed. "I tried."

She was pleased that she'd never worn the dress with Tony. He liked her to wear black dresses, to look sophisticated, not like an innocent, as he called it.

In The Yucatecan, romantic music wafted across the candlelit room. Paula and Matt sat in a plush green leather corner booth while their waiter prepared a Caesar salad before them as if officiating at a sacred rite; he later flamed the huge prawns for their entrée with matching solemnity. Paula restrained a smile.

"The rituals amuse you, don't they?" Matt asked.

Paula's honesty asserted itself. "It's interesting to watch, but they seem to take it so seriously. Sometimes I'm tempted to giggle. Is it really that important to them?"

Matt chuckled. "My sentiments precisely. I suppose most of us are rather amusing when we're too fervent about our work."

"Tell me about your work," she suggested. "About how you happened to start the company."

"You really want to know?" he asked.

"I really do!"

Slowly his story unfolded. Just graduated from Stanford, he'd begun with nothing more than his education and determination when he'd started the electronics company. It had taken off like a rocket, despite his peers' doubts. Finally, it had grown so rapidly that it consumed his life. "Yet it didn't bring me happiness," he explained. "I decided there must be something better to living than just working and spending money."

"Oh?" Everyone had always raved about his fantastic success. She'd never suspected that he'd been unhappy.

After a while she found herself telling him about her public relations job in Phoenix, skirting the issue of Tony and explaining her actual work.

"You didn't like it, did you?" Matt guessed.

"No, not really. It was too much gilding of the lily for me, and too many of the so-called lilies — the clients — were out-and-out thorns. There's really nothing that I enjoy as much as writing about people and places, but with honesty."

"Then you should," Matt said. "You should use your gift the way it was intended."

Her gift? She'd never considered her writing ability as a gift. As for how it was intended — she hadn't really thought about that either. She'd have to give the idea some thought.

After dinner they strolled around the hotel, looking in on the shops, then sitting in the darkness by the pool. Stars sparkled in the moonlit sky, and a soft breeze whispered through the palm trees. As they chatted about the scenery, the passers-by, and the day ahead, strange undercurrents flowed between their words and silences.

"Paula . . .?" Matt began. Moonlight shimmered across his golden hair as he bent toward her, taking her hand in his.

"Yes, Matt?" she asked.

It was a long time until he spoke, and by then his tone of voice had become casually distant. "We'd better get you in so you're well tomorrow to go to Tulum."

Regret swept through her. Surely he'd begun with something very different in mind, she thought as he tugged her lightly to her feet.

At her door he asked, "Shall we leave early for Tulum? Nine? Ten?"

"Nine is fine," she answered, then laughed at her inadvertent rhyming. Eight would be better. Even seven. Or six! She couldn't seem to get enough of being with him. But what was new about that?

Pleasant morning drive in Matt's air-conditioned rental car, Paula jotted in her notebook, not mentioning the excitement throbbing through her. *The white limestone road cuts through low green jungle like a ribbon leading to adventure. Occasionally windmills protrude over the tropical vegetation, usually near Mayan settlements.*

As they stopped to look at a chicle tree from the car window, she read from her guidebook, "People came in search of chicle trees for making chewing gum and found the Mayan ruins here instead."

Matt chuckled. "Just like life. Looking for one thing and finding another."

Like her own embarking on this trip to forget Tony and discovering that she still loved Matt, she brooded. Her heart felt a twinge of anguish as she remembered she'd be flying home, and Matt would be flying to Vanessa in Cozumel.

The parking lot at Tulum was jammed with tour buses. Tourists moved slowly among the native shops, many sipping soft drinks from cans and some using straws to drink milk from coconuts.

As they strolled to the fieldstone gate leading to the ruins of the ancient walled city, the air was oppressive. "Are you going to be all right?" Matt asked.

"I think so." She already felt limp.

"We'll take our time. You can sit down if you like."

"I'll be fine," she insisted, but Matt looked at her dubiously before he went to buy tickets.

Minutes later, they were inside the gate, and Paula caught her breath at the sight. The Mayan ruins rising from the land were extensive and very different from any others they had seen — lower structures, no pyramids. She and Matt made their way to the main buildings, surrounded by groups of tourists and guides speaking English, Spanish, French, and German. Paula caught bits of the talks. "Post-classic Maya. Temples and palaces were low — a time of the Mayan decline."

Here and there were remnants of primitive paintings on the ruins in black, red, blue, and green. "No carvings in Tulum," another guide explained.

"How this must have impressed the Spaniards," Paula said, glancing at the remnants of its castle, watchtower, and temple.

When she and Matt had finally wandered through the ruins to the sea cliff, the view over the tropical growth and out to the turquoise sea was magnificent. Matt climbed up and down the ancient stairways and cliffs to take pictures, and Paula sat down on the sand with her notebook. Her mind seemed to capture the vision that had come to the Spaniards who had first seen Tulum.

She began to write: *Here at the Mayan's "city of dawn," traders once glided by in huge canoes laden with jade, honey, wax, salt, and feathers. The first Mayan city sighted by the Spaniards, Tulum must have impressed them with its castle, watchtower and Temple of Frescoes. They described it as being as large as Seville.* She wrote on, caught up in the wonder and beauty of the place, delighted that her research had merged with what she saw now. She was blissfully unaware of the passing tourists or the bright sunshine and humidity.

After a long time, she realized that she had written the entire section on Tulum for her article; it had nearly written itself. When she looked up, Matt was sitting on the sand beside her.

"You look as pleased as I feel about the pictures," he commented.

"Wonderful!" She allowed him to help her up.

At the shops on the edge of the parking lot, they stopped for iced colas. "If you have enough energy, we can stop a Xel-ha for lunch," Matt suggested. "It's on the way."

"I'm fine. I wouldn't miss it," Paula insisted, though she felt wobbly. She didn't want to ruin his day. And now that her Cancun area article was actually underway, she had to see that famous national park and natural aquarium.

When they arrived at Xel-ha, a breeze blew through the trees. It rippled the brilliantly hued water and caressed the white sandy beaches above rocky shores. "It's magnificent!" she exclaimed, taking notes. "I didn't expect this!"

Matt took pictures at every turn.

In a huge open thatch-roofed restaurant, they lunched on buttery lobster, black beans, and hot corn tortillas. "Another feast," she pronounced. "I'll get fat."

"I doubt that," Matt said, taking another appreciative look at her. She'd worn a white sundress over her bathing suit, and the way he gazed at her made her feel beautiful.

A cruise ship had anchored in the distant bay and tendered passengers across to the white beaches, where they sat under trees eating their box lunches. Snorkelers explored the turquoise water off the rocky shore.

"Let's rent a boat," Matt suggested and she agreed. It would be a rest.

They wandered to the small pier to make arrangements. After a while, an oarsman rowed toward them and helped them aboard, then the three of them glided across the shimmering lagoon. The surrounding low jungle was just across the water, and above, the sky was azure with puffy white clouds. In the shallower water, the surface was so clear and mirror-smooth that it served as a window to view the brilliant tropical fish.

"Far too lovely for note-taking," Paula said, glancing at Matt. It seemed that they were in paradise.

Later they lay on the white sandy beach in their bathing suits, and despite the beauty of the scene, Paula's eyes drifted shut. She slept deeply for a long time, then the dream came to her. She and Matt were on a small boat, gliding across the lagoon; his blue eyes brimmed so with love that words were unnecessary. In the midst of their happiness Vanessa appeared behind him, her lovely hand gripping his shoulder, twisting him away to her.

"Matt's always loved me!" Vanessa said angrily. "He always has, and he always will!"

"No!" Paula cried. "No!"

When she opened her eyes, Matt was gently shaking her shoulder. "You're dreaming, Paula," he said. "What on earth was that about?"

Blinking, she found only Matt. She sat up and groggily brushed the sand from her arms. "I was dreaming —" She stopped abruptly.

"About what?"

"Nothing much. Thanks for waking me up."

As she looked out again at the beauty of Xel-ha, the dream finally receded.

"It's nearly four o'clock," Matt told her at length. "I'd better get you back to the hotel if we're to go to Isla Mujeres tomorrow."

"I'd hate to miss it. If only life could continue like this. . . ." *Forever,* she'd nearly said.

When they returned to the hotel, she was still brushing the remnants of sand from her arms while they stepped into the elevator. "It was such a wonderful day," she remarked to Matt as the elevator started up.

His eyes gleamed with warmth. "It was for me too."

Moments later, as the elevator door opened on their floor, Paula couldn't believe her eyes.

Vanessa Starke Packard!

The dark-haired beauty stood poised to enter the elevator, but stepped back when she saw them. "There you are!" she exclaimed at Matt. "After your phone call yesterday, I decided that things were rather dull in Cozumel."

Paula's heart sank. Matt had phoned her?

Vanessa's amber eyes darted curiously toward Paula, then back to him, and Paula understood precisely why Vanessa had returned. She was not taking any chances on losing him!

11

At eight-thirty the next morning, Paula waited in the shade of a thatch-roofed bus stop with Matt, Vanessa, and three couples from their hotel. A warm breeze rustled the palm fronds overhead, and small yellow birds twittered from the nearby hibiscus. Just beyond Paseo Kukulkan, the nearly trafficless main highway, the Caribbean Sea shimmered bright turquoise and blue. Paula felt almost well again, and the glorious sun-drenched day seemed so full of promise for their boat trip to Isla Majeres . . . and so full of decision.

She glanced at Vanessa in her scanty white shorts and strapless top. She was gorgeous with her dark hair, amber eyes, and voluptuous figure, like an exotic tropical bird. By comparison, Paula thought she must look like an ingénue in her sedate blue sundress. If only Vanessa hadn't showed up!

"Here it comes!" Matt exclaimed. He hurried out to the highway to flag the bus. He'd seemed in a holiday mood since breakfast, as if it weren't unusual for him to escort two women around. Last night he'd seemed a trifle uneasy squiring them to a restaurant, though he'd tried to create a pleasant atmosphere. After dinner, the three of them had strolled through the gift shops and out around the pool. Matt had been the one to suggest turning in early. At least, Paula had hoped that Matt and Vanessa had turned in early — and separately.

As the bus slowed for them, Vanessa laughed. "How terribly chic to ride the local bus when you have a rental car at the hotel!"

Matt shrugged. "When you collaborate on travel articles, you have to try out the transportation that other tourists might use."

"To be perfectly honest," Vanessa replied, "I'd feel better if we'd chartered our own boat. You never know quite what to expect on excursion boats or local buses."

Paula found herself objecting. "But if you didn't take local buses and excursions, you'd never meet the natives, nor have any real adventures."

Vanessa shot her a contemptuous look, as if to say, "What could one expect from anyone so untraveled?"

Matt seemed unaware of their interchange.

First to board the bus, Vanessa saved a seat beside her. "Over here,"

she called out to Matt.

"Thanks, but this is better," he answered sitting behind the bus driver in the aisle-facing seat. "I'm supposed to tell him where we get off to catch the boat."

A quick smile masked Vanessa's anger. "In *your* Spanish?"

"I'll manage," Matt answered with a grin. "Come sit here with us."

"No, thanks," Vanessa replied petulantly.

Settling down next to him, Paula said nothing, noticing that Vanessa's smile faded as Matt talked to the bus driver.

As Matt sat back he remarked in a quiet tone, "This beats driving. Besides, I turned in the car."

"Oh?" Paula replied, surprised that he'd confided in her. Why hadn't he told Vanessa? Would she expect a car at her beck and call?

Paula extracted her notebook from her shoulder bag. As she began to take notes about the changing scenery, Matt read over her shoulder. She said, "I hope you can read my scribbling better than I can!"

"For a bus writer, you scribble very neatly," he responded, his breath warm in her hair.

Remembering their kisses, she glanced up into his eyes. They met hers, glowing with warmth. Her heart raced, and after a fast smile, she quickly turned to her notebook. If only she weren't so frightened of being hurt again now!

After a while she glanced up at Vanessa, who smiled coolly, as if she wasn't in the least concerned about what was taking place between them. Her air of self-confidence was more than disconcerting. How could the woman be so self-assured unless she knew something Paula didn't know?

A grayness of suspicion descended upon her like a cloud, and negative thoughts pierced her consciousness: Maybe Matt was trying to make Vanessa jealous — Tony had used her in that precise way to make his wife jealous. Maybe it was a common male game — something men did to feed their egos.

No! She thrust the thoughts away. There was nothing to be gained from pessimism, especially since she'd promised herself to be open to whatever might happen today.

Last night in her room after dinner, she'd decided it was too late to unravel her tangled trail of mistakes with Matt. If he preferred Vanessa by the end of the day, she'd fly home alone tomorrow morning. She'd called the airport last night, and there'd be no difficulty in obtaining a seat on the morning plane. Still, she would wait; she would give the future she'd dreamed of with him this one last day.

She was jerked back to the present as people on the bus shouted, "Stop! Halt!" Their grinning driver, however, drove blithely past the group of wildly waving tourists at the bus stop, then stopped at the

next. There seemed neither rhyme nor reason to his stops, and many of the passengers on the bus finally laughed with the driver, caught up in the spirit of a wild escapade. Paula smiled hopelessly with the others at their unlikely ride.

Suddenly Vanessa stood. "Matt, isn't this the bridge where we get off?"

"Yes, of course! But I'd told him . . ." By the time Matt explained to the bus driver, several long blocks had passed.

"We'll have to walk all the way back to the bridge," Vanessa complained, intertwining her arm with Matt's. "Your wonderful Spanish at work, I presume?"

Matt laughed, extending his other arm to Paula, and she managed a pleasant smile as she took it. She decided again that he was trying to create an atmosphere in which all three of them would be comfortable. It reminded her all too much of Tony's balancing acts between women.

When they arrived on the dusty path under the causeway bridge, twenty or so other tourists were waiting to catch the nine-thirty boat. Within minutes a Mexican official arrived. "Today we have unusual circumstances," he explained. "The nine-thirty boat to Isla Mujeres goes at eleven-thirty."

The crowd was furious.

"No sense in letting it ruin our day," Paula finally said.

Vanessa ignored her. "If only we'd chartered our own boat!"

Matt raised a warning brow. "A little adversity is good for acquiring the virtue of patience," he commented. "Now let's see that beautiful smile, Vanessa."

Vanessa put on a spurious smile.

After wandering through the gift shops of the nearby hotels, they sat out on the white sandy beach facing the distant island of Isla Mujeres.

"So close, and yet so far," Matt said ironically as they watched the fishing boats, yachts, and sightseeing boats cut through the sparkling water.

"Nothing is lost on a writer," Paula replied, making notes about the varicolored sea with its striations of purple and great luminous streaks of turquoise. "It's so beautiful that I'd be happy just to sit here all day."

The truth, much as she fought it, was that she would be happy to be anywhere with Matt. She hoped that her feeling wasn't obvious. It was a pleasure to glance occasionally at him. He didn't seem too engrossed in his paperback novel, and her heart leapt hopefully as he looked at her.

"Good book?" she inquired with a glance at his paperback.

"Not bad," he answered.

She suspected that the book was irrelevant to their interchange. Yet

there seemed nothing of consequence to discuss with Vanessa on the other side of him, and Paula tried to block out the inner voice that repeated over and over: *He's attracted to both of you!*

Just after eleven o'clock they all made their way back to the boat dock under the bridge. A throng of tourists waited, perhaps a hundred, nearly all of them grumbling about the boat's delay. Apparently an insurance convention group had chartered the scheduled boat out from under them.

"Just the sort of thing to expect," Vanessa remarked.

Finally their boat was sighted in the channel, and soon they were boarding. "Free drinks down below," the woman in charge said to counter the loud complaints.

Later, Paula sat out on the deck of the boat gratefully sipping a cool cola and admiring the view as they cut through the brilliant sea. The beauty of the pale blue sky and the shimmering water made the day dreamlike. Then she glanced beside her at Matt and saw Vanessa's hand on his shoulder. The woman's amber eyes danced with secrets as she talked to him. It was impossible to imagine what Matt was thinking behind his dark glasses, but he most definitely seemed interested in what Vanessa had to say.

Paula contemplated a new idea. Was it possible that he loved both of them in different ways? Certainly she and Vanessa provided the variety to amuse a playboy: Vanessa, the sophisticated jet setter; Paula, the innocent girl next door who adored him. The more she considered the notion, the more certain she became of its truth. Matt enjoyed dangling two women, just as Tony had! Why hadn't she seen it immediately? Why didn't she learn?

Yet I promised to wait and see, to give the situation this last day! she reminded herself. She glanced again at Matt and Vanessa. Vanessa caught Matt's face in her hands and playfully kissed his cheek.

Paula turned away in shock. His face had been averted and she hadn't seen his expression, but he certainly wasn't resisting just then!

She was hurt, then enraged with herself as well as with them. Enough! She'd given him the benefit of the doubt over and over; she'd given him enough of this last day already too. Never again would she play this threesome game. She'd be polite to Matt, but nothing else.

As they approached the weatherbeaten docks at Isla Mujeres, Paula jotted notes, despite her shredded emotions. *Turquoise sea, white sandy beach, palm trees and thatch-roofed ramadas climbing the hillside, tourists everywhere.* She saw that Matt had finally extracted himself from Vanessa and was taking pictures of the tropical island scene.

The woman managing the boat announced to her passengers, "Because of complications this morning, we are running two hours

late. We cannot pick you up until five-thirty; then we'll take you to dinner on the other end of the island —"

"We'll be lucky to get back by night!" Vanessa protested into the general anger voiced by the passengers.

Paula decided not to worry about it. It appeared that all she'd need tonight was packing time anyhow! She'd leave a farewell note at the hotel desk for Matt tomorrow morning, she thought, pretending that her heart didn't ache.

Matt and Vanessa waited on the dock. What a peculiar threesome they must make, Paula thought resentfully as she joined them. They strolled along, surveying the sights; watery pens along the dock holding enormous turtles, grizzled fishermen extracting meat from huge conch shells, tourists snorkeling in the foaming surf.

After browsing through the colorful outdoor shops Matt suggested, "Why don't we have lunch and then spend the afternoon on the beach?"

How could he appear so innocent? Paula fumed.

"It doesn't look as if there's anything else to do here," Vanessa answered. "If only we'd chartered a boat!"

Matt cast her a warning glance. "No one forced you to come here."

Vanessa blanched, looking taken aback. "I'm sorry."

"Forget it," Matt replied.

At least Vanessa's complaining *did* bother him, Paula decided with a touch of vengeance.

"Now who else is starved?" he asked.

"I'm famished," Paula answered, not adding that being upset made her hungry.

"Wonderful!" he said.

As they climbed the sandy hillside to the restaurant, Vanessa seemed intent on winning her way back into Matt's favor. "It is lovely," she was saying, then adding something about being so happy she'd come.

Was Matt such a fool that he might be taken in by the woman's sudden reversal? Paula wondered. It didn't seem possible.

Paula entered the outdoor restaurant just in front of them. Behind her, Vanessa took Matt's arm, and Paula felt obliged to follow the maître d' to their table at the wooden railing overlooking the sea. The man no doubt assumed that Matt and Vanessa were a couple, and seated them together across the table.

Paula's anger grew as Vanessa deferred to Matt, hanging on his every word. At first it seemed an act, but then Vanessa seemed serious. Perhaps she needed a man to approve of her because she'd had no father around during her childhood. Perhaps she was suddenly afraid of displeasing Matt.

Gayle had warned her in Merida, "You have to fight for him." But

how? She most certainly was not going to throw herself into Matt's arms! If he didn't like her for herself and preferred Vanessa, there was no help for it. Perhaps there never had been.

After they'd ordered their lunches, Paula tried to control her emotions. Matt was taking pictures of the magnificent seaside views, and she pulled out her notebook, supposing she'd have to write something. *Isla Mujeres is an idyllic island,* she jotted unenthusiastically. A coconut palm covered sand bar. She speculated on what a tourbook might call the white beaches; perhaps "unexcelled." Part of her heartbreak, she thought, was that it was so beautiful here, she should be enjoying it, not feeling so miserable.

Her lunch of salad and turtle soup was delicious, but Vanessa monopolized Matt, excluding Paula from the conversation about Cozumel so completely that it was impossible to enjoy anything. According to Vanessa, the photographic possibilities at Cozumel were nothing less than sensational. Occasionally Matt tried to include Paula, but she was so uncomfortable that her words seemed contrived, as if another person spoke through her lips.

When she'd finished her lunch, she wrote in her notebook to conceal her anguish. After a while she looked around the room and noticed the three couples from the bus stop in Cancun sitting at a nearby table.

One of the women smiled at her. "Would any of you like to hire a taxi with us to drive out to the ruin on the south end of the island? The six of us don't quite fill two taxis."

Paula glanced at Matt and Vanessa. It sounded as if they were planning to leave for Cozumel anyhow! Rising from the table Paula excused herself. "I think I'll go with them . . .," she began with a catch in her throat.

Caught up in the conversation, Matt nodded.

More hurt than ever, Paula stopped at the other table. "Thank you, I'd like to share a taxi with you if I may. I'll wait in front of the restaurant."

"We'll be with you in a minute," the woman said.

Outside, Paula sat down dully on a wooden bench. Blinking to hold back her tears, she tried to concentrate on the sea. Moments later, the three couples joined her, introduced themselves as they all walked to the road where local taxis waited. Her new companions were a jolly, enthusiastic group. Perhaps some of their attitude would rub off on her, Paula hoped, as they split up into the taxis.

It was a relief to escape the continual tension of being with Matt and Vanessa as the taxis bounced along to the south end of the island. The wives and husbands in the group seemed so congenial, getting along together, and with the others too. Why couldn't she find someone to love like that?

They piled out of the two taxis near a small Mayan ruin overlooking the shimmering sea. The Temple of Ix Chel seemed mere rubble compared to the ruins they had already seen. It was nothing at all like Uxmal, Kabah, Chichen Itza, or Tulum, yet it was a remnant of the glory of the Mayans too.

According to her guidebook it had probably been a coastal stop for the ancient Mayans during their religious processions. The text said, *When the Spaniards first landed on Isla Mujeres in 1517, there were hundreds of clay statues to Ix Chel, the goddess of fertility. Thus they named the place Island of Women.*

A place for women who wanted children. Women like her, whose dream it was to have a happy family, Paula thought. Maybe it was best that her loving Matt had proved futile. He'd never want children. He wanted to travel, to photograph places and people. There was no place for a wife in his life, except for a jet setter like Vanessa, who probbly didn't want children either.

When everyone returned to the taxis, hers had a flat tire. Another of Gayle's blessings in disguise? Paula wondered bitterly. Sitting down on a rock, she pulled out her notebook. If nothing else, she could work on her article and on her tan. It would be hours until the boat's return.

By the time their driver came back with a new tire, changed it, and drove her group to the beach area, it was after four o'clock.

Paula walked out to the beach, even more heartsick when she spotted Matt and Vanessa. Sunburned, they were lying on lounges in the shade of a ramada. She reluctantly made her way down to them.

"Where on earth have you been?" Matt asked as he rose to his feet.

Bewildered by his agitation, she explained, "To Ix Chel, the Mayan ruin —"

"I thought you'd left for the restroom! And then when you didn't return . . ."

If you hadn't been so intrigued with Vanessa and her spiel about Cozumel, you might have heard me! she thought. She said instead, "I did tell you I was going with the three couples from the bus stop."

"I'm sorry, I must not have heard," he apologized, looking appalled. "Is there time for me to go to get pictures of the ruins?"

Vanessa's amber eyes flashed with irritation. "Now? The boat should pick us up in an hour!"

"There's no need for photographs," Paula said. "It's a very minor ruin, nothing compared to what we've seen." She looked around. "Where is everyone?" Only a few visitors lolled in the sun, and most of them were already sunburned.

"Some of them came by chartered boats and they've already left," Vanessa said, pouting. "Not to mention the insurance group who chartered our boat away from us. It came by for them at three-thirty."

Matt added, "Some of our group have taken taxis to town and are going back to Cancun on the ferry. There's still plenty of time for our boat to come."

For a moment Paula thought she might lie out on the beach to avoid the torment of being with them, but her arms and legs were already red, as were her shoulders. She settled at a nearby wooden table in the shade of a ramada and produced her notebook again. "I'm going to try to finish the article," she announced as much to herself as to them.

She never became quite oblivious to them as she wrote. Vanessa seemed to sleep, and Matt was reading. The breeze cooled Paula's sunburn and the sound of the sea lulled her churning emotions. She would fly home tomorrow morning without fail.

At five-thirty she had finished the first draft of her article. Looking up, she saw no sign of their boat on the shimmering sea, only occasional fishing boats returning to the other end of Isla Mujeres.

The couples with whom she'd shared the taxi hurried up the nearby path. "We're going to take taxis to the ferry," one of the men explained. "The last ferry today leaves at six-thirty!"

"The *last* ferry?" Paula repeated, putting away her notebook. "I'd like to go with you!" She didn't dare get marooned for the night on the island if she were to catch the morning plane home!

"Maybe we'd better go too," Matt suggested, getting to his feet.

"On the local ferry?" Vanessa asked, aghast. "And how will we get to our hotels?"

"There are supposed to be taxis on the other end," the man replied.

Other stragglers on the beach seemed to make the same decision at once, and everyone jammed into the few roadside taxis.

On the crowded old ferry, Paula found one of the last seats on the top deck among the natives and crates of chickens, grateful at least that she had a place to sit. Watching the magnificent sunset, she attempted to excise her anguish although she knew full well that Matt and Vanessa leaned on the railing far behind her. Out of sight, out of mind, she tried to tell herself, but it wasn't working.

As the last lingering rays of light hung over the sea, Paula found herself turning to look at them against the railing. Vanessa was reaching up to Matt, then kissing him.

Paula twisted away. Fool! How could she have been so stupid and blind to have fallen for him again? His interest in her had been a mirage, an illusion. This was reality!

Night had fallen when the ferry docked. Shaking with emotion, Paula made her way off the ship and peered out into the darkness. There was no sign of taxis, no lights of a city. Old trucks and cars roared off the ferry beside her as she made her way along the rutted roadside. In the middle of nowhere . . . how appropriate!

"Paula!" Matt called. "Over here. There's only a bus."

A truck's lights illuminated the night for a moment, and she saw Matt and Vanessa running for a battered bus.

Another truck roared toward her, but she crossed in front of it. Brakes screeched and a horn honked angrily.

"You might have been killed!" Matt exclaimed as he let her onto the bus in front of him.

She didn't care, she was tempted to say. She didn't even care!

The battered bus was jammed; natives had already gathered up their children onto their laps, but the spaces were quickly filled. The bus driver closed the door despite the long line of passengers waiting in the darkness.

"Paula?" It was one of the women with whom she'd shared the taxi to Ix Chel. "Maybe you can squeeze in here."

"Thanks," she said gratefully. She perched on the edge of a double seat already crowded with the American as well as a Mexican woman and baby.

The American woman said, "I know you've been sick. You're probably pale under that sunburn."

It wouldn't be surprising, Paula thought, hanging onto the railing as the bus took off and bounced through the darkness. She looked around for Matt and Vanessa, and might have laughed if she weren't so heartsick.

Vanessa, looking furious, stood with a Mexican woman within the rusty chrome rim of what had once been a seat. Matt was jammed in the crowd standing at the rear of the bus.

The ride seemed interminable, made bearable only by the gurgling infant in the smiling Mexican woman's arms. Outside the world was dark, and Paula imagined the low growing trees and tangled undergrowth of jungle. It suddenly struck her that the bus might not be going where they thought. "Cancun?" she asked the woman.

She nodded, pleased to be helpful. "Sí, Cancun."

When lights did appear, it was another city. Puerto Juarez. The bus stopped and locals disembarked, only to be replaced by American tourists who'd been left behind at the ferry. "We hitched a ride on a pickup truck," one of them explained. Laughter filled the bus as the tourists compared notes.

"What a fiasco," the American woman beside Paula chuckled. "An elegant vacation in Cancun, and they're riding through the night in the jungle on a pickup truck!"

Paula forced a smile. "Not quite what the tourist brochures advertise, is it?"

Finally the bus stopped in downtown Cancun, and Paula

disembarked with the other tourists. Matt joined the line of men flagging down taxis.

He held the rear door open for her. "You look awfully tired. I hope the day wasn't too much for you."

"I'll no doubt live," she replied.

Vanessa sat in the middle beside her, and Paula lay her head back on the top of the seat, closing her eyes. None of them spoke as they rode back to the hotel. An exhausting day for everyone, Paula thought, trying desperately not to recall the image of Vanessa kissing him.

At the hotel, she rushed for the elevator, not caring whether they followed. When she stepped on, they were right behind her.

"Are you feeling worse, Paula?" Matt inquired. "You're so quiet."

"I'll be fine." She wondered if she would really ever be fine again. In any case, she would shower, call the airlines, and finish packing.

His blue eyes watched her intently. "How about dinner?"

"No thanks, I'm not hungry — just tired."

"But you have to eat."

Her temper flared. "I just want to be alone!"

His eyes widened as he backed away. "Sorry."

Behind him, Vanessa smiled triumphantly.

When the elevator door opened, Paula rushed through the corridor for her room.

In her room, she pulled off her clothing and stepped into the shower, letting the spray of lukewarm water cleanse her and soothe her sunburn, if not her agony.

By the time she stepped out, she felt as if she might survive. She slipped into her embroidered caftan and telephoned room service for a cup of soup, and the airport to make arrangements. It was better not to think, she decided as she began to pack furiously. She'd spent too much of her life thinking about Matt, tormenting herself over him. She'd made a mess, nearly throwing him into Vanessa's arms, but then he hadn't required much urging either.

She found the coral necklace and earrings that Evan had given her. She would send him a check. She remembered him drunkenly rushing at her and turned the memory away. Ashes. Everything about her and men disintegrated into ashes. She'd run away from Tony only to slam into the confrontation with Evan — and heartbreak with Matt! Never, never again!

She turned, seeing her grief reflected in the mirror and quite suddenly a sob escaped, then another and another.

You're only feeling sorry for yourself, an inner voice murmured through her despair.

And who else would feel sorry for me? she returned with angry sobs.

I could drop dead in this hotel and not one person here would care, not one!

She threw herself on the bed, sobbing uncontrollably. If God loved her the way that Gayle said, then why did she have to endure heartache with men over and over? Why had she even been born? What was the purpose of life?

It was a long time before she sat up and wiped her eyes. Trembling with wretchedness, she supposed Gayle would say something again about having to give your whole life over to Jesus, that it wasn't enough just to pray occasionally. "I don't think you've ever committed yourself *unreservedly* to Jesus," Gayle had said. *"Unreservedly."*

Gayle said she'd been angry with God when her father died, and Paula knew that she was mad at Him now too. It was unfair! Unfair that no man loved her, and that Matt — whom she'd loved for so many years — preferred a woman like Vanessa! If God was so good, why wasn't he fair too?

She recalled Gayle saying that no one had promised that life would be fair . . . or what we might think is fair. And then Gayle had spoken on Christ, who strengthened her.

Tearfully, Paula mulled it over. It was true that she'd never surrendered *everything* to God. She'd never surrendered *anything,* and right now, there was nothing to surrender!

"All right, I surrender!" she cried out hopelessly. "I give up everything to you! I've made a mess of my life anyhow. If it is true that Jesus died for me and my sins, I would really like to know," she continued. "I would so like to straighten my life around, to find the joy and peace with Jesus that Gayle talks about." An enormous sob escaped her lips and she fell onto her knees.

After a moment, she realized that she *had* meant every word of it. She was tired of trying to manage on her own, tired of hurting over Tony and Evan and — Matt. "But if only you'd give me someone to love, someone who'd love me too. . . ."

Paula felt a sudden glow in her heart as if a lamp had been lit. The golden warmth spread rapidly through her and joy leapt in her soul. Waves of love swept through her like torrents until she was surrounded and permeated by what could only be God's embrace.

I love you! I love you! her soul responded. I just didn't know. . . .

It might have been an eternity or merely moments before she opened her eyes. She only knew that an amazing joy had filled her soul. With such happiness, she thought, it didn't matter if she never had a man to love her. If it was God's will for her to be single forever, then it really didn't matter. Nothing else mattered now. She felt healed and cleansed — reborn with love. How astonishing that she had come to the Yucatan

to see the religious sites of a pagan people — ancients who had sacrificed live children to their bloodthirsty gods — and that she had found a loving God instead.

For a long time she could only marvel at what had happened to her. Finally, her thoughts returned to her surroundings, to her situation, and she was reminded of Vanessa. To Paula's amazement, she found her heart filling with compassion and love for the woman; it was as if she could see the unhappy child in Vanessa — the immature girl who'd never grown up. Surely, only God's love could make her feel such sudden tenderness for someone so difficult to love.

A knock sounded at her door. "Room service," the accented voice announced.

Still caught up in wonder, she opened the door.

The young Mexican bellboy nodded politely and carried her tray across the room, flipped on the dining room light, and arranged her soup and crackers. Collecting her wits, she found her purse and a tip for him. She recalled the doctor's parting words and said, "*Vaya con Dios.* Go with God."

"Gracias," the bellboy replied with a surprised smile, then headed for the open doorway.

Matt stood at the door, with an armful of roses. "I was hoping to talk to you, Paula."

Stunned, she gazed at him. For a dreamlike moment it seemed that they were in another time and place — by his front steps with the sunshine streaming down through the trees.

"Come in," she offered hesitantly.

"I hardly know what to say," he began, "only that I made such a mistake, letting you go."

"No, Matt! Not again!"

"Please hear me out," he asked. "And please accept the roses."

As she took them, she realized that there were red, yellow, pink, and white roses jumbled together — much like the armful she'd brought to him that Saturday morning over two years ago. "Thank you," she said with a catch in her voice. She looked into his eyes and seemed to see into his soul.

His words were contrite. "That morning you brought me the roses, it was as if God stopped the world for an instant and said, 'Look at this lovely girl who's all grown up now.' "

He smiled nervously, then continued. "I knew that there was something special about the feeling, and about you. But I just wasn't ready. I was still power hungry, money hungry. I knew you were a nice young woman, that it wouldn't just be a few kisses and all over. You have no idea how I struggled against reaching for your hand that night

when we went to a movie, against taking you into my arms at your front door."

"And I thought you saw me as a little sister —"

"No . . . not since that morning of the roses. It seemed as if it were a moment caught in time. And then I fell off that old kitchen stool into your arms. If ever God shoved anyone!"

"God?" she inquired. The first time he'd mentioned Him could have been something anyone might have said, but now — a second time. "I've never really heard you mention God since you were a boy speaking in church. I thought you'd given up on Him."

Matt shook his head. "I did for a long time, but — well, I told you and Josh that you didn't really know me anymore. Something happened to me several months ago. You see, I'd come to such a low after selling the company — when I should have been soaring with happiness. After it sold, I felt so useless, so directionless. Worse, I was besieged with 'new friends' who were interested in my money. Everything seemed futile. Finally I thought back to the most joyous moments of my life."

"And . . .?"

"I remembered when I'd been close to the Lord as a boy." He paused self-consciously, then went on. "I finally got down on my knees and asked if He'd have me back, despite my turning away."

"And did He?" Paula asked hopefully.

Matt nodded. "It seems He's always waiting for us."

"He was waiting for me too," she said with a surge of joy. For a moment they reveled in the happiness of each other's eyes, then a horrid thought invaded her mind. What if she'd misunderstood? What if he were only leading up to Vanessa, the woman he'd always loved? It was better to say it herself: "And now God's returned Vanessa to your life!"

"Vanessa?" he asked, his brow furrowing. "Yes, I suppose so, though she was the last person I expected to see again."

"You certainly didn't flee," Paula pointed out.

Matt nodded. "I couldn't help being flattered to see her chasing me after — after dumping me for an older man with money. She admitted she'd made a bad mistake, giving me up. So, when I thought you preferred Evan, I wanted to see if there was still anything between Vanessa and me."

He paused for a long time, and Paula remembered Matt and Vanessa kissing on the dance floor in Merida and tonight at the railing of the ferry.

"There's nothing left," he said. "I began to suspect it when she insisted on going on that calesa ride in Merida. She threw herself at me, but I was in no mood to catch her."

"I don't understand. . . ."

"Vanessa and I have grown in opposite directions. It would never work again."

"But you kissed her tonight on the ferry!" Paula protested.

Matt shook his head. "No," he said. "I phoned her in Cozumel to tell her it was all over."

"But you two were kissing on the boat and on the ferry!"

"Vanessa doesn't give up easily," Matt explained. "She saw you look toward us. *She* kissed *me.* It was the same sort of kiss she forced me into on the dance floor in Merida. I'm afraid she staged them, in part, to make you mad at me."

"Vanessa hoped to make *me* mad at you?" Paula asked.

He nodded. "You see, after you disappeared this afternoon, I was so upset that I told her I love you."

Paula blinked in amazement. "That you love me?"

"That I love you," he replied solemnly. "And when we returned to the hotel and you dashed off into the elevator so mad, I thought that maybe . . . just maybe you loved me too."

"Oh, Matt!" How did he *not* know that she'd loved him all this time? Could she have possibly kept it so well hidden?

His blue eyes brimmed with love. "Please marry me, Paula?"

Overwhelmed, she didn't know what to say. She'd dreamed for years of this moment, but now . . . now obstacles loomed. For one, her jealousy. After what she'd just gone through with Vanessa, she couldn't bear to endure it again. Women would always chase after him. "But, Matt," she protested, "even your mother says you're a playboy."

"A playboy?" he asked, astonished. After a moment, understanding flashed in his eyes. "I suppose it's because she's from another generation. Her meaning of the word isn't quite what it's taken for nowadays. If anything, my fault was being a workaholic. But I know what I'll be vowing to God about forsaking all others. I'm ready to settle down, Paula. And I want to settle down with you. I want you to have our children."

"Children? But I thought that you wanted to travel, to photograph the world!"

"Only if I can do it with you," he responded, "and not all of the time. There'd be summer vacations and years later when the children are grown. There would be so much else to do in our own little world, a lifetime of pictures to take!"

They looked into each other's eyes over the roses, then he took them from her, placing them on the dresser at their side. "I love you so much," he murmured.

"And I've always loved you, ever since I was a little girl."

"Then will you marry me?"

"Yes, Matt . . . oh, yes."

When their lips met she forgot everything except that her greatest wish had come true, that God had given her this wonderful man, that he had been meant for her.

When they moved away to catch their breath, she suddenly remembered. "But I'm flying home tomorrow morning!"

"Not without me," he said huskily, then smiled. "And I hope we're not going to have to wait until June for the wedding. We've known each other quite a while."

"We could get married here, I suppose."

"But I'd like to have your parents' blessing," he said firmly.

Surely he would have it if he told them about what had happened to him. God would work that out too.

"Don't you want a church wedding?" Matt asked.

"Yes, I really do!" In her mind's eye she could already visualize it in the neighborhood church where she'd seen him speak so many years ago, where she'd sung hymns before she'd had the vaguest inkling about God's love and joy.

Matt dropped a kiss on her forehead, then glanced at the dining area. "We can't have soup and crackers for our engagement dinner!" he said with a laugh. "Besides, it's probably a good idea for us to go downstairs for dinner."

Paula felt herself blushing, then loving him all the more.

As she gathered up her purse and room key she thought she might be floating. *Thank you! Oh, thank you!* she prayed joyously. She recalled again the golden warmth that had spread rapidly through her, and it seemed that Matt's love had followed like an echo. It was as if God had shown how much He loved them, and that they were to reflect it, to spend their lifetimes on earth echoing and reechoing His love.

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ECHOES
OF LOVE

Earth's crammed with Heaven
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.
Elizabeth Barrett Browning

At last she understood. When people allow God into their lives, they are given spiritual sight to recognize Him in the commonplace, for wherever He is, that is holy ground.

"I feel so very strongly that God intended us for each other, darling," he was saying.

"And I do too." How clearly now she could see God's loving hand in their relationship — bringing them together again after all the years apart, drawing them gently until they made their separate ways to Him, then granting them a love based on Christ as the center of the home that would soon be theirs. Even Glynia had played a part — reminding Mark of a chapter in his life that would now forever be closed because it had been forgiven.

Amy looked up into his shining eyes, and it seemed that they were caught again in a transcendent moment . . . in a golden burst of happiness. Its source, she understood now, was the wondrous and eternal song of joy God had placed in her heart.

reading on their faces the momentous event that had just taken place. "You're Mark Marston's grandson, aren't you?"

"Yes, yes, I am. And this is my bride-to-be . . . as of a few moments ago."

The minister beamed. "I can't imagine what in my sermon prompted that response, but it looks like an exceedingly fine idea to me."

As they started down the steps, Mark called back, "I'll be phoning for an appointment. I need to talk with you about . . . about another matter."

Amy pondered the idea that someday Mark might want to follow in his grandfather's footsteps after all. Overwhelming as the thought seemed, she felt sure that, no matter what happened, God would see them through.

Waving good-by to the minister, Mark hurried her out to his car. "I have some things for you in the trunk. I was going to give them to you at your apartment after church, but here you are instead!"

"Presents in the trunk?" It didn't sound as if it were the most likely place for a ring —

"They're not from me." He smiled at her perplexity. "To add to the suspense, there are actually two presents — one from Mom and one from Valerie."

"What on earth could they be?" she asked as he opened the trunk. He reached in and held out an oddly familiar white box. Puzzled, she lifted off the lid, only to find a neat layer of white tissue. Suddenly she suspected what it was and stripped back the paper. "It's Val's wedding gown!"

He grinned. "She thought you might like to have it."

Her eyes filled with tears of happiness. "Oh, yes!"

"No tears!" he admonished, dropping a kiss on her forehead. "Besides, there's another gift." He reached into the trunk again and turned around what appeared to be a framed picture.

"The sampler — the sampler your grandmother made!"

"Mom wants to keep it in the family, and she hoped that you — that we might like to have it. I think she meant it as a kind of engagement present for both of us."

"Oh, Mark, I love it!" Realizing the implication of the gift, Amy slanted a shy look at him. "Then you must have told your parents that you were planning to propose."

"Once the Lord got the course He wanted me to take through my thick skull, I couldn't bear to keep it to myself. And, judging by their reaction to the news, I wouldn't be surprised if they hadn't prayed for just that for years."

"You mean — they didn't mind losing another son? They want me too?"

Cradling her closer in his arms, Mark said, "Of course they want you! You're already like one of the family. What is that old saying? 'They're not losing a son, they're gaining a daughter.' "

Sighing happily, she tore her eyes from him to gaze at the words embroidered on the old linen sampler:

church or to your new commitment?"

His eyes sparkled. "Amy, didn't you hear me? I said I love you."

"Oh, Mark!" she cried. "I love you too! I've always loved you!" Then to her own stupefaction, she heard herself asking, "But what about Glynia?"

"She's only a childhood friend." His expression grew somber. "She's always been so unhappy and — and unstable that I've felt compelled to try to help her. She's so much like . . ."

"Like Erika?"

"Yes, like Erika, who I've finally forgiven. I guess I've always thought that if I didn't please Glynia, she'd take that — that same rash road, which I now see was half-witted thinking on my part. Glynia doesn't need me. She needs God." He added in an embarrassed but forthright tone, "I know what you must think about finding us like that in the dining room. I didn't kiss her. I wouldn't be surprised if she saw you coming and maneuvered us into that pose."

"I wouldn't be surprised, either," Amy agreed thoughtfully. Glynia had managed to wreak more havoc than snatching the bridal bouquet from her that day — she had accomplished her purpose. Still, Amy was not entirely convinced. "But Glynia's nightgown in your bathroom —"

He reddened. "The apartment actually belongs to *her* friends, and she stays there when she has an assignment in L.A. That's *all* there is to it. You'll just have to believe me, Amy. You're the only woman I've ever loved, and it somehow seems fitting that you were God's instrument to bring me back where I belong. . . ." There was a long pause. "You *will* marry me, won't you?"

Suddenly there was no doubt what God had planned for them. The answer was in her eyes as she said without hesitation, "Oh, Mark . . . yes!" At his look of joy, she asked wryly, "That didn't take much coaxing, did it?"

He caught her in his arms. "Don't think I wasn't prepared to coax, no matter how long it took!"

"Mark . . ." she sighed, nestling into the curve of his shoulder, "do you think we could be married right here in your grandfather's church?"

"Nothing would make me happier!" He glanced around the sanctuary. "Do you think it would be irreverent for me to kiss you right here?"

Noting that everyone except the organist had moved on into the vestibule, Amy shook her head. As his lips trembled against hers, then tenderly held, it was as if she had never been kissed before, as if God were giving them His benediction. Their lingering kiss was the promise of a lifetime of love and commitment and growing together.

Moments later, the organist hit a final chord and called out an amused and enthusiastic, "Amen!"

They moved apart, blushing happily.

At the church door the minister shook their hands, his eyes twinkling as if

"Make me the kind of person You want me to be."

A joyous serenity filled her, and she knew that this was what she had been seeking. She needed God in her life, just as He had been the center of her parents' life, and the Marstons' and Valerie's. If Mark was not a part of God's plan for her, then . . . that would have to be all right too . . . though the minister had added that God loved everyone so much He would never demand anything that would not be the very best for that person . . . that He had a wonderful plan for each life.

They stood as the service drew to a close, and Amy joined in singing *Amazing Grace.* She realized she had a lifetime of learning ahead to become the kind of person God wanted her to be, but now she had time . . . forever . . . eternity! It seemed as if the secrets of the universe had begun to open to her little by little, as if her own understanding was rearranging itself in her head around His truth, His wisdom.

"See you," Rhea whispered mid-hymn and quietly left to ready things for the coffee hour.

Amy turned slightly to watch her leave. To her astonishment she saw Mark in the row behind her, singing the words of the hymn with a wondrous light in his blue eyes as they met hers.

He stepped around to take Rhea's place in the pew, still singing in his rich baritone: "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun."

Such a thrill rushed through Amy that there was no thought of protest when he took her hand in his. Together they bowed for the benediction.

When the service ended, Mark asked, "Did you know this was my grandfather's church?"

"Yes, I did. But I surely didn't expect to see you here!" she replied. "And, you — did you know I was here?"

"Not until I parked behind your Gramp's car. I knew then that something wonderful was in store for us because —" He looked around at the church building. "Because this is the church where God called that little six-year-old boy to be a minister . . . and because, after you left Alexandria, I realized my foolishness. I began to see how pointless my life was becoming . . . that it seemed to be leading nowhere. And finally . . . after years of running from Him, I rededicated my life to the Lord."

Her voice was hushed. "You've rededicated your life to Him?"

"Yes."

It seemed impossible, entirely too much to accept. She reflected upon what people called God's mysterious ways, the astonishing circumstances so often termed coincidence. "You may not believe this," she began, "but I've committed my life to Him too . . . this morning . . . here. . . ."

Mark looked as incredulous as she felt. "Talk about timing . . ." He hesitated, then said, "Amy, I love you . . . I want to marry you."

"Mark . . . are you sure? You're not just reacting to your grandfather's

days; she had rarely been inside the walls of a church, except recently as a tourist. As a matter of fact, she had visited three churches — Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, the Valley Forge Chapel, and Christ Church in Philadelphia — all quite different in architecture, but sharing a common bond — the love and adoration of God. Was God trying to get through to her?

She and Rhea were no sooner settled in the second to last pew than the organ began an anthem, one she had heard Catherine sing. She found the page in the hymnal as music flooded the church like a brilliant sunrise. "Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love . . ."

Amy joined in softly, her voice quavering, ". . . hearts unfold like flowers before Thee, opening to the sun above . . ." *Hearts unfold . . .?* Yes, she thought, her heart had been unfolding to God since that first visit to Grace Cathedral, from her prayer at Valley Forge and the reverence she had felt so deeply at Christ Church. She sang on, a surge of hope in her spirit. ". . . Melt the clouds of sin and sadness, drive the dark of doubt away, giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day . . ." By the third verse, the words had become her own prayer of exultation: "Thou art giving and forgiving, Ever blessing, ever blest, Well-spring of the joy of living . . ."

A gray-haired minister stood in the pulpit greeting the congregation, an enormous dark wooden cross on the white wall behind him. As the service proceeded, Amy settled back to listen. The sermon dealt with God dwelling in one's heart by faith, not by works . . . that faith was a gift of God.

At the end of the sermon the minister said, "God, through Christ, will not only forgive us of our sins, but will cast them into the deepest sea. He removes them from Himself and from us as far as the East is from the West. If you feel an emptiness, a loneliness, a longing for completion in your spirit, God is the one you are searching for. He is the one who will make you feel whole. And if you would like to dedicate or rededicate your life to the Lord, please repeat this prayer."

Amy bowed her head with a sense of expectation.

"Dear Heavenly Father, I need You," the minister began.

"Dear Heavenly Father," she repeated softly but with certainty, "I need You." She was scarcely aware that many others in the congregation were praying too as she followed the minister's words with growing conviction. "I acknowledge that I've been directing my own life and, that as a result, I've sinned against You. As I confess my sins, I realize that Christ promised immediate and complete forgiveness through His death on the cross. I invite Christ to be on the throne of my life. Fill me with the Holy Spirit as You commanded me to be filled and as You promised in Your Word if I prayed in faith. I pray this in the name of Jesus Christ . . . and thank You. Amen."

Tears clung to her lashes, but Amy's heart soared with gratitude and she felt wonderfully cleansed. She understood for the first time that Christ was the bridge to God, the way to experience His love. She silently prayed,

had prayed at the Valley Forge chapel and not too much later, Mark had pulled off the road, and they had made up again. *I've been falling in love with you,* he had said. And there had been that breathtaking kiss in Aunt Alicia's dining room — but no definite *I love you.* Then Glynia had come upon the scene.

Fool! Amy chided herself. What a fool she had been! A sob tore through her, then another and another until she dissolved in a torrent of hot tears. *Why, God? Oh, why?* she asked as sobs wracked her body. *Why couldn't things have gone right?*

It was a long time before she blew her nose and washed the tears from her face. She would have to do something to avoid this depression, she decided, and for some reason, it occurred to her to look for the religion page in the morning paper. Perhaps she would go to church tomorrow morning. It couldn't hurt — could it? At least going to church would give her something to do.

Scanning the list of churches in the city, she discovered that the one nearest her apartment was the church Mark's grandfather had pastored. She clipped out the information and started determinedly for her closet. She now had a reason to select something to wear, a reason to set her alarm clock, a reason for going on. Perhaps that was what was really important in life — purpose.

The next morning was warm and sunny, and Amy drove Gramp's old blue car to the church, not wanting to walk so far in her high-heeled sandals. Just around the corner from the old Spanish-style church, she found a parking space.

"Amy — is that you?"

To her surprise she saw Rhea Smithers just arriving too, hurrying along the sidewalk. Amy climbed out of the car, closing the door behind her.

Rhea extended her hand, smiling delightedly. "I'm so happy to see you."

"Is this your church?"

"It certainly is. I've been attending for the past ten years — ever since I became a Christian."

"Oh, really?" What a curious thing to say — *ever since I became a Christian,* she thought, but the church bells pealing out their welcome distracted her. A throng of people funneled to the entrance, and she and Rhea followed along.

As they climbed a short flight of stairs, Rhea said, "I'd ask you to join me, but I'm serving during the coffee hour, so I have to sit near the back door."

"Oh, I don't mind," Amy replied with a twinge of nervousness as Rhea guided her to an elderly couple greeting people at the door.

She found herself swept along with the worshipers. Suddenly she was in the sanctuary, feeling the swirl of organ music compelling her forward. Amy felt a moment's panic. It had been so many years since her Sunday school

Amy stood to leave, preferring not to hear any bromides about time healing all wounds or hope springing eternally. "Thanks, Mrs. Smithers."

"Please call me Rhea."

Amy nodded. "Thanks, Rhea." She felt grateful to find a new friend, even though the woman was probably old enough to be her mother. "Time for me to get busy. I have an empty refrigerator and cabinets to fill."

"I'm going to a church luncheon for a few hours," Rhea said. "Take my extra key with you in case you want to use the phone."

"I couldn't. I appreciate your trust, but you scarcely know me."

Rhea placed the key in her hand and folded her fingers over it. "I know you well enough. You remind me of myself when I was your age." She had already wrapped three slices of the homemade date nut bread in plastic. "Here, take them with you. I insist. You'll save me from working off even more calories."

By Friday afternoon Amy was well established in her apartment, although the telephone, mounted over the kitchen counter, had yet to ring. Her happiness, she decided, was dependent upon staying very busy, and she had managed that easily this week. Niggling thoughts that Rhea might intrude too much had proven groundless, since the woman had an extremely busy life of her own in addition to managing the ten apartments in the building.

Saturday morning, after washing Gramp's car in the apartment building's carport area, Amy purchased plants and repotted them in new terra cotta containers outside on her small balcony. She hung the Boston fern near the kitchen window, placed the ficus benjamina and red geraniums on the balcony, and the tiny palm on the dark oak coffee table. Finally it was all done and she stood back to admire her accomplishments. Only now there was nothing left to do for another week until her summer classes began. She could read or write poetry, but she was not in the mood, and Gramp's old television set was out for repairs. A sense of despair slowly descended over her.

Worse, she could no longer hold her thoughts of Mark at bay. What if she could never forget him? She recalled how stunned she'd been the day he picked her up and helped her move from Gramp's house. "You certainly look surprised," he had said with that hint of amusement around his lips. He'd slid his dark glasses up into his hair in that characteristic gesture of his. And that night his voice had caressed her name in the billowing fog when he urged her to go to San Francisco. How she had fled upstairs to her room! Even then she must have subconsciously foreseen this day.

And then there had been the mix-up about the hotel room in San Francisco, when they had ended up sharing a suite — and that devastating first kiss. Her mind rushed past the unfortunate dinner with Tony and his pick-up to the day she and Mark had made up — when she'd tripped into his arms in the tower at Princeton. *I think I love you,* he had said, and, tentative though his words were, at that moment they had been enough. Strange, she

When she lay down on top of the sleeping bag, Amy continued to ponder the subject, and she arrived at a conclusion: For some reason known only to Him, God didn't want them together here on earth. Most likely it was for her own good. All this time she had been trying to give God orders, if and when she thought of Him.

From now on, Lord, I leave everything in Your hands, she half-thought, half-prayed.

Be still. Be calm, an inner voice seemed to say.

Amy awakened the next morning with a peculiar sense of assurance that all would be well, much as she had experienced the day she and Mark had swum out beyond the ocean's breakers.

After dressing in a turquoise T-shirt and bermudas, she felt ready to begin to move her things in. She searched her wallet for the card of a neighborhood trucker, then hurried downstairs to use the manager's phone. The trucker would have to bring the things from the mini-warehouse: Gramp's brown hide-a-bed, oak end tables, lamps, a coffee table, occasional chairs, and, of course, the cartons of household supplies. Fortunately, he could deliver this afternoon. Within the next hour, she had made arrangements for utilities and a phone, although the latter would not be installed until Friday.

Rhea seemed delighted with her company, and set out coffee and sliced date nut bread for Amy to enjoy between the phone calls. "How much better you're looking this morning," she commented. "It's going to be fun having such a beautiful neighbor."

Amy set her coffee cup down. "Beautiful?" she inquired ruefully. If she were beautiful, Mark hadn't seemed to notice!

Rhea's gaze moved up over her steaming coffee and rested on Amy's eyes. "You don't even realize that you're attractive, do you?"

She recalled that Mark had once said almost the same thing. "No, I'm afraid I don't really see myself that way. So much of my life I've been overweight."

"Then you've probably acquired a better sense of values than if you'd looked like this all your life. It seems that many beautiful women think being decorative is all that's required of them." She smiled reassuringly. "I'm sure we're going to have streams of young men wearing out your doorbell as soon as they know you're here."

"I doubt it. I don't seem to have much success with men," Amy confessed. "In fact, I've just been hurt — very badly. That's why I arrived early."

"Oh, dear . . . I'm so sorry to have brought up the subject."

"I suppose I should have kept it to myself, but just telling someone else seems to help."

"I'm here anytime you need someone to listen. I know a little about pain myself. The good news is that it can be overcome."

midafternoon as she parked in front of her apartment building, but she wanted nothing more than to go straight to bed.

Rhea Smithers, the apartment manager, was delighted to find her at the door, yet a trifle surprised too. "How can you possibly move in tonight, honey?" she asked. "Your furniture isn't here. You've no bed —"

"Believe me, I'm tired enough to sleep on the carpeting," Amy assured her. "I feel as if I could sleep for days."

But the woman insisted on loaning her an old sleeping bag and some linens.

"Are you sure you're not sick?" Mrs. Smithers persisted as she followed Amy up the stairs, her arms laden with blankets, towels, the sleeping bag and a pillow. "You look terrible. I hope it's not that young man —"

"Young man?" Amy's mind flashed to Mark.

"The one who brought you here last week."

"No, Rob's only a friend." At least she hoped that was still true. He had been hurt too.

Finally she was in the small studio apartment, dropping the heavy suitcases on the new carpeting, then rubbing her sore shoulders while Rhea deposited the sleeping bag and linens on the breakfast bar. The apartment smelled of carpeting and paint, fresh and clean.

"Isn't it lovely?" Rhea asked, admiring the rooms.

"Yes, it is. Far more attractive than I imagined it might be." Despite its small size, the high slanted ceiling and the crisp white walls imparted an airy effect, while the dark wooden cabinets and terra cotta tones of the carpeting lent warmth.

"I asked the workmen to finish your apartment first. I had a feeling you might need it early."

"Oh?"

Rhea started for the door, her brown eyes radiating the same kindly concern that Catherine Marston often turned on her. "Just stop by if you need anything else . . . and feel free to use my phone till yours is in."

The woman's kindness touched a lonely chord in Amy's heart, and she found herself saying, "Thank you for everything . . . thank you for caring."

"Isn't that what God wants us to do here on earth?" Rhea remarked before she closed the door behind her.

What God wants us to do here on earth? Amy's mind repeated groggily. She wasn't so sure about Him. She had prayed that He would work everything out, and look what had happened! True, the wedding had come off without a hitch. But, immediately afterward, there had been the horrible scene with Mark and Glynia. Why hadn't He worked that out too? She had prayed specifically that He would take care of matters between her and Mark. Was this the answer? Catherine had once said that God had three answers: yes, no, and later. Apparently His answer concerning her relationship with Mark was a resounding *No!*

11

Early the next morning Amy's plane lifted off the runway at National Airport, and she glanced disconsolately out the window, catching final glimpses of the Washington Monument, the White House, and the Pentagon before they flew along the Potomac River.

She had so looked forward to completing her research on the city and then going on to Boston with Mark. But any woman would be thrilled to work for Mark Marston. Perhaps he had already found a replacement employee — as easily as he had found someone to fill the void in his heart.

Her note to him had been caustic enough: *Normally I don't back out when I've given my word, but I'm sure you won't have any trouble finding someone to finish the research. I'll send the Philadelphia report to your office. Amy Curtis.* She had added her last name with a flash of venom, as though he might confuse her with countless other Amys.

No one had been awake when she'd left, and she had dashed off thank-you notes to the Marstons and Aunt Alicia. If necessary, they would have to consider her an unmannered ingrate before she would divulge yesterday's scene between Mark and Glynia. It had been especially shattering that Mark had chosen the same setting for his — his dalliance with Glynia . . . the dining room where he had kissed Amy so fervently Friday night after their dinner in Alexandria. But then he probably always checked out the discreet corners when he was with women. And Glynia herself was no novice. Their mutual interest had endured for years.

It was impossible to force the heartbreaking image from her mind. Last night after the guests had departed, only her fury had enabled her to pack, change her flight reservations, and order a taxi for this morning. She hadn't slept more than two hours. She didn't even want to think about how Val and Thom would construe her sudden departure.

The flight attendant stopped by with a breakfast tray, but Amy waved it away. "No, thank you, I'm going to try to sleep instead."

And, to her amazement, she slept . . . and slept.

When the plane finally landed in Los Angeles, she felt drugged from sleep and disturbed dreams, but managed to collect her luggage and catch the airport bus to Santa Rosita, then a taxi to the Marstons' house, where she picked up Gramp's old Chevy. With the three-hour time change, it was only

the double doors were slightly ajar. Hesitating, she summoned her courage and pushed the door open.

The scene before her was as unreal as if she had stepped onto a stage: Glynia with her arms encircling Mark's neck, her lips tilting up toward his.

It was a moment before the reality of the situation penetrated her brain and she gasped, "Mark —!"

His blue eyes widened, turning to her as he pulled away from Glynia.

"How could you?!" she cried out, aware that her words sounded as theatrical as the scene being played out before her. "How could you, Mark?" she flared again from the depths of her anguish. She would have slapped his incredulous face with the phrase again if one of the caterer's assistants hadn't peered out from the kitchen at that moment, taking it all in.

Turning, she ran wildly down the hallway, composing herself only slightly at the door. Nearly obscured by her heartbreak and indignation, the crowd of guests across the lawn on the side terrace blurred so that they might have been subjects in a French Impressionist painting. She hurried out to join them.

Seeing her, Rob rose from his chair on the terrace, an expression of confusion crossing his face. "What's wrong, Amy?" he asked solicitously.

"It's just that — that I wanted to sit with you," she said breathlessly and knew from the frown on his brow that he didn't quite believe her.

He pulled out a chair for her, and a speculative glimmer filled his brown eyes. "Mark and Glynia?"

She nodded, tears threatening, then spilling down her cheeks. She had managed to control her emotions throughout the wedding ceremony, but there was no stemming them now.

"I knew he'd hurt you," Rob muttered angrily as he handed over his handkerchief. "I knew he would! And I've never wanted to do anything more than give him the beating of a lifetime right now!"

"No — please. Let's don't do anything to spoil Val's wedding!"

He inhaled deeply, fists clenched, but he sat down again. Reaching for her hand, he patted it clumsily, then drew it to his lips.

"Please, Rob —" Amy felt her gaze drawn toward the house. Mark stood just outside the parlor door. He turned and spoke to Glynia, who was observing from within. Amy remembered the jade nightgown and decided there was no longer any question as to why Mark had been so reluctant to commit himself to her. Glynia was the one he had wanted all along!

Rob squeezed her hand reassuringly, his eyes filling with hope.

Oh, Rob, I'm just going to hurt you too! Even through her pain, she felt a stirring of compassion for him. Comforting as Rob's presence might be, she couldn't give him the kind of false hope that Mark had held out to her for so long. She would have to tell him as kindly as possible that there could never be anything but friendship between them.

Taking a deep breath, she began to explain —

As it sailed unerringly toward her, Amy reached out. But at the last moment, Glynia shoved her aside and snatched the bouquet away, scattering white rose petals across the terrace.

For a second Amy lost her balance, but a relative moved forward to stop her fall. Incensed at Glynia's rude behavior, Amy opened her mouth to protest, but there was no time. The newlyweds were making their departure in a shower of rice.

"Have a wonderful honeymoon!" she called after them, quickly forgetting her embarrassment and Glynia's ugly scene in her happiness for her sister and new brother-in-law.

Within minutes, they had sped away in Thom's car.

The long-awaited wedding was actually over and, delighted as she was for Val and Thom, Amy could not stem the sudden wash of emotion that flooded her. Now she was most certainly on her own.

She attempted to set the thought aside, looking about for Mark, but he was nowhere in sight. He was undoubtedly seeing Thom and Val to the airport. No, the arrangements had been changed. Several guests made tentative moves to leave, but Aunt Alicia encouraged everyone to stay and visit, and many lingered.

The quintet began the romantic strains of *Lara's Song,* and Rob came to her side with an adoring gaze in his brown eyes. "Would you like to take a walk around the grounds?"

She glanced frantically about for Mark, but he was still missing, and Rob awaited her answer. "That would be nice, Rob. It's so beautiful here —"

As they wandered around the far end of the house, admiring the grounds and the blue sky with its puffy white clouds, he suddenly slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her to him, his breath warm against her hair. "I hope you realize how much I care about you, Amy."

She fumbled for words. What could she possibly say in reply? She cared for only one man.

After a moment Rob seemed to understand her unspoken reaction and added a low, "I can wait."

"I'm sorry, Rob." Quivering, she bit her lower lip as they returned to the others. Where was Mark? And, for that matter, where was Glynia? The Benningtons were seated at a table near Aunt Alicia, so Glynia was no doubt still around too.

A horrifying premonition overcame her and, as they reached the terrace, she apologized, "If you'll excuse me, Rob, I have something to do in the house."

The caterers were still bustling about the kitchen, and she hurried on to the parlor, but there was no sign of Mark or Glynia anywhere. She was about to leave, when she heard the sound of a chair scraping a bare floor. Trembling, she continued across the hallway to the dining room, where

concern for others. Amen." Dr. Rumsfeld turned to Thom. "You may now kiss the bride."

Holding Val's bouquet, Amy fought back tears as they kissed almost reverently, aware that Mark's eyes were on her. When Val turned for her bouquet, the quintet began to play the recessional. Mark offered his arm to Amy, his eyes shining, and they followed the newlyweds through the smiling guests.

Outside in the balmy air of the beautiful garden, Amy kissed Val and Thom. "You two look so happy that I'm afraid you're going to float away!"

"We just might!" they agreed. "But not before we greet all the people who came to wish us well."

The Marstons were behind them, kissing and embracing the bridal pair, then Mark and Amy. The very air around them was charged with joy. Mark laughingly caught Amy in his arms, dropping a kiss on her cheek before the guests flooded out into the sunshine, and everyone was swept up in congratulatory embraces. There were hugs from beaming cousins, aunts, and uncles from her mother's and father's families and handshakes from the Marston relatives, but it was the kiss and embrace from Mark that Amy held in her memory, even while others passed through the reception line.

Following the relatives, Glynia arrived in a cloud of pale green silk. She stepped past Amy after a cool handshake and turned her face to receive Mark's kiss. "Nice wedding."

"Yes," Mark said, "yes, it is."

"Though I favor a fast one in Las Vegas if one *must* tie the proverbial knot," Glynia laughed as she moved on down the reception line.

Amy forced a smile as she greeted Glynia's parents, the Benningtons. Just behind them were Thom's university friends and Rob, handsome in a dark blue suit, and his delighted parents lavishing compliments on her.

The string quintet moved to the spacious terrace where caterers served elegant canapés and punch from damask-covered tables. When the guests had all passed through the reception line, there were pictures to be taken, with the well-manicured grounds as a backdrop and toasts on the tree-shaded terrace.

It seemed only a short time later that Valerie was downstairs in a cream raw silk outfit, Thom in a dark suit, ready to leave for their three-day honeymoon in Boston.

"Time to throw the bouquet!" someone called out. "All eligible ladies onto the terrace."

Feeling rather foolish, Amy stepped forward hesitantly, then realized that she was not alone. Several others had joined her, including Glynia. Amy hoped Mark would not get the wrong idea — the last thing he needed was to feel trapped. At just that moment Val smiled at her, then took a precise bead on her position before turning her back to toss the bouquet over her shoulder.

Dr. Rumsfeld began the service. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God and in the presence of these witnesses to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony, which is an honorable estate, signifying unto us the mystical union which exists between Christ and His church —"

Calmer, Amy's gaze rested on the candelabra arrangement on the mantel as she listened. ". . . the union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy, for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity —" Strange, Amy didn't recall ever having heard those vows before. Did God really intend marriage for the mutual joy of husband and wife? For their comfort in all circumstances?

"Love is always patient and kind, never jealous nor boastful; never arrogant nor rude. Love does not insist upon its own way; it is not irritable nor resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in right. Love withstands all things, believes all things, hopes all things; love perseveres —" Then the minister was saying to Dr. Marston, "Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?"

Dr. Marston said firmly, "In the names of her departed mother and father, I do."

Was it possible that somehow their mother and dad knew of this wedding? Amy wondered with misty eyes. Were they looking down from heaven now? Bringing her thoughts back to the ceremony, she readied Thom's gold wedding band as the vows began.

"I, Thomas, take thee, Valerie, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, as long as we both shall live."

Then Val was repeating: ". . . to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold, to love and to cherish, as long as we both shall live."

Amy felt Mark's gaze resting on her and she looked down at her quivering bouquet, reminding herself that the exchange of the rings was upon them.

Moments later, the minister blessed the bridal couple, and Thom was saying, "In token and pledge of our constant faith and abiding love, with this ring I thee wed."

Val's voice was soft, full of love as she repeated the vow, and then the minister pronounced the final words: "Forasmuch as Thomas and Valerie have consented together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and hereto have pledged their faith each to the other, and have declared the same by joining hands and by giving and receiving rings; I pronounce them man and wife. Those whom God hath joined together, let not man put asunder."

The final prayer ended, "Grant that their wills may be so knit together in your will, and their spirits in your spirit, that they may grow in love and peace with you and one another all the days of their life. Give them such fulfillment of their mutual affection that they may reach out in love and

"Time to go, ladies," Dr. Marston called in a low voice from the hallway. "The fellows are starting down the back stairs."

"Coming!" Val returned quickly.

Feeling a new twinge of anxiety, Amy took up her bouquet, an asymmetrical cascade of pink rosebuds, white jasmine, and small green ivy with an abundance of trailing turquoise ribbons the shade of her dress. The pink roses brought to mind those that Mark had given her that wonderful afternoon in San Francisco.

"Ready, Val?" she asked and was surprised to see Val's head bowed in prayer.

Val opened her eyes. "Ready." Smiling serenely, she accepted her bridal bouquet — a cascade like Amy's, except for the white roses among the jasmine and ivy, and white trailing ribbons matching the ribbons of her white gown.

In the hallway Dr. Marston, looking distinguished in his black tuxedo, waited to escort Valerie downstairs. Below, the string quintet could be heard playing *Oh Promise Me,* signaling that Mark and Thom should be in their places downstairs.

"Hurry!" Dr. Marston urged.

Amy blinked away the dewiness of her lashes, then stood with Val just to the side of the stairwell, listening to the final strains of the melody.

After a pause, the string quintet began the resounding opening chords of Wagner's "The Bridal March" from *Lohengrin.* The powerful fortissimo chords vibrated through the stairwell. At her musical cue Amy cast a hopeful glance at Val and, remembering to smile, started her slow journey down the stairs, the bouquet in her hands shaking slightly, giving off the fragrance of jasmine and roses.

Mark was waiting at the foot of the stairs, resplendent in his black tuxedo. As she moved down the steps to the majestic strains of the music, his unwavering gaze lent her assurance, then he was reaching out to take her hand, drawing it through his arm, and together they turned toward the guests in the parlor. It seemed an eternity as they moved in step with the music through the room and toward the improvised altar flanked by pink roses and ivy.

Then at last there was Dr. Rumsfeld — and Thom, looking achingly solemn. Mark ushered Amy to her designated place, then moved on to stand behind his brother.

Seven triumphal notes heralded the bride's entrance, and everyone turned to watch Valerie's descent down the stairway. At first there was only the sight of her white gown with its ruffles and ribbons, then the beautiful white bouquet with its trailing ivy, and then, on Dr. Marston's arm, Val smiling so beatifically that she might have been an angel. Her hazel eyes turned to Thom, and their gaze held with such love that tears welled in Amy's eyes. If only their own father and mother might be here, she reflected as Val took her place next to Thom.

get to be my age, it seems more important to know things in advance. I have a feeling that there will be!"

Amy attempted a noncommittal smile. Surely Mark would make his intentions known soon. Still, it wouldn't be right to detract in any way from Valerie's and Thom's own special time. No doubt that was what was holding back Mark's total declaration of love.

When they returned to Aunt Alicia's house after the dinner, Mark hung back with her, allowing the others to enter first, then lingering behind in the warm June air. As he kissed her in the moonlight, she felt certain that it was no longer a matter of his falling in love with her, but that he, too, had arrived at that breathtaking destination. But when, if ever, would he say those wonderful words of commitment?

When Amy and Val awakened the next morning, it seemed impossible that the day of the wedding had actually dawned. Sunshine beamed through their windows, gilding everything in its path — a promise of the joy to come.

The morning hours flew and, just before two o'clock, Amy found herself fastening the diminutive white-covered buttons on the back of her sister's wedding gown.

"You must be the most beautiful bride who's ever walked the earth," Amy observed. "Just wait till Thom sees you! You've never looked lovelier."

Val's white gown, an old-fashioned confection with ruffles and ribbons, suited her and the historic house perfectly. She wore her honey-blond hair in a soft pageboy, emphasizing her natural beauty.

The full-length mirror mounted on the antique stand reflected Valerie's smile. "Thanks, Amy. It's happiness."

"No-o-o, I don't think so. At least, not just happiness alone. There's something about you and Thom and the wedding that's so right." Amy tried to find the words. "It's not just you two . . . or the ribbons and ruffles on your gown. It's that everything seems so — *intended.*"

"I believe it was," she replied with utter confidence. "I hope you'll feel the same way someday and want to wear this gown." She gave an almost self-conscious laugh. "I left an ample hem in it with that in mind."

"Oh, Val, I'd love to wear it someday — and I love you for thinking of it!" How she wished she were wearing it today as she took Mark's arm at the foot of the stairs.

Val only smiled as she placed the simple white circlet and veil on her head.

Catching a last glimpse of herself in the mirror, Amy hoped that Mark would approve of her beruffled and beribboned turquoise gown, patterned after Val's. It was charmingly old-fashioned, as was the beautiful French twist that Val had created of her hair. Coaxing wisps to curl around her face with her fingertips, Amy nearly jumped when the quiet tapping sounded at their bedroom door.

close proximity to a man of the cloth for any great length of time. But the middle-aged Dr. Rumsfeld looked very human in his slacks and open-necked shirt; in fact, he was quite down-to-earth, not spouting holy platitudes as she had expected. Thom had met him months ago while arranging for the wedding with Aunt Alicia, and he and Val had been counseled by Dr. Rumsfeld earlier this week. They seemed very fond of him.

"Is this where we'll have the string quintet?" Dr. Rumsfeld asked as they prepared for the rehearsal.

"Yes," Catherine replied. "They'll be playing while Alicia and I greet guests at the front door."

"The chairs for guests will be set up through the middle of the room," Dr. Marston explained, leaving space for us to pass around on this side."

The chairs were to be delivered in a few hours. Plans had been made for every detail of the wedding. At precisely two o'clock Amy was to start down the impressive staircase; Mark would await her below, then escort her into the parlor, where the ceremony would take place. Then they would wait with Thom, the minister, and the assembled guests while Valerie and Dr. Marston made their way down the staircase and into the parlor.

After the run-through, Valerie sighed. "Why can't we get it right?"

Aunt Alicia laughed unconcernedly. "This old parlor has known only perfect weddings, including your mother's and father's. But it seems a tradition to run through at least three rehearsals. Now let's take it again from the top!"

Even though they were dressed casually in slacks, Amy and Valerie had donned their high-heeled wedding shoes for their practice walks down the stairway. As Amy made her way slowly down the steps the second time, she felt more certain of her footing and glanced at Mark. He was smiling up at her as though unaware there was anyone else in the world. At the bottom of the stairs, he took her arm and ushered her into the parlor where the minister waited.

After the third run-through Aunt Alicia said with a twinkle in her brown eyes. "I do believe that's the best rehearsal this old parlor has ever seen."

"I prayed hard enough," Valerie said.

"Good for you, dear," Catherine smiled. "And don't forget tomorrow."

Valerie promised, "Believe me, that's one time I won't forget!"

Despite their light-hearted banter, Amy again sensed that Val's newfound faith was real.

That night at the rehearsal dinner in a stately Georgian club, Mark was more attentive than ever. Even though the two of them were surrounded with aunts, uncles, and cousins — since Val and Thom had dispensed with the tradition of confining the evening to the principals of the wedding — Mark continued to bestow adoring glances upon her.

When one of the elderly aunts asked Amy, "Is there another wedding in the offing?" Amy felt her cheeks redden.

The aunt patted her hand. "I shouldn't have asked, dear, but when you

when Mark suggested they return to Aunt Alicia's. Rob would pick up his car there and drop Glynia off at the hotel where she was staying with her parents.

Later, when the couple drove away, Mark took Amy's hand and started up the brick sidewalk. "I'm sorry about the way things turned out. Glynia's going through a rough time." He unlocked the front door. "I hope you understand."

Amy dredged up a smile. "I know. You and Glynia go back a long way." She only wished that the memory of Glynia's green nightgown hanging on his bathroom door hadn't returned to haunt her again.

"I can't say that seeing you and Rob together makes me terribly happy either."

"Mark, you know he's only a friend —"

He looked only slightly relieved, then shot a sidelong look at Valerie and Thom behind them. "Let's find a more private place — the dining room. Come on."

Breathless, she willingly allowed him to lead her, only vaguely aware of Val and Thom slipping into the parlor across the hallway.

A dim stream of light filtered through the half-opened double doors, illuminating the barely restrained passion on Mark's face. "Amy —," he whispered as his arms drew her to him and his mouth tilted down to hers. "What am I going to do about you?"

Her heart went out to him and her fingers found the thick hair at the nape of his neck. *Love me, just love me,* she pled wordlessly.

Minutes later the front door opened, and the stairway light snapped on. "Where is everyone?" It was Aunt Alicia, peering about, followed by a laughing Catherine and Dr. Marston.

Thom chuckled. "Caught again!"

Aunt Alicia rallied. "Don't let us stop you! I'm glad to see that this old parlor is still good for courting! Excuse us — we're on our way upstairs."

Amy felt like giggling. On the other hand, it was one thing for Val and Thom to be caught in a passionate clinch, but quite another for herself and Mark, as matters now stood. Fortunately the footsteps moved on upstairs. After they were gone, Mark whispered with amusement, "I feel like a little boy with my hand in the cookie jar."

A bubble of laughter escaped her. "And am I a cookie?"

"Even more delicious."

"Oh, my!" she responded, and, remembering his partiality to cookies, decided it was time to wrest herself from his arms.

Saturday morning passed in such a flurry of activity that there was scarcely time for brunch before the wedding rehearsal with Aunt Alicia's minister, Dr. Rumsfeld.

At first Amy felt uneasy around the minister, never having been in such

address Amy. "Is this your first visit to the East Coast?"

"Yes, it is," Amy replied, then to fill the awkward silence added, "It's fascinating, isn't it?"

Glynia directed an incredulous look at Mark, only to receive a frown. Undaunted, she smiled smugly at Amy. "I suppose so, though none of this is new to me. I attended boarding school in New England for several years, you know."

Amy did know, of course. Everyone knew. She looked to Mark for help, but he was deep in conversation with Thom.

Rob came to her rescue. "Why did you choose New England?"

Glynia paused before smiling engagingly. "The schools, of course, are outstanding here — the best in the country. I wouldn't have settled for less."

Amy concentrated on the hurricane lamp with its flickering candle. It was common knowledge that Glynia had been hustled off to boarding school during her mother's second divorce and that Glynia was by no means a scholar. . . . Before Amy was tempted to utter a cutting remark, she made a stab at her pecan pie.

When she looked up at Mark over a forkful of the luscious dessert, she was astonished to see his grateful expression. So he hadn't missed their interchange after all. While Glynia was concentrating on Rob, who was politely questioning her about her experiences, Mark took the opportunity to mouth a confidential, "Thanks."

Thanks — for what? Why was he concerned about Glynia? Did some dire problem lurk beneath that sophisticated veneer?

After dinner they roamed the picturesque cobblestone streets of Alexandria, admiring the shops and restaurants, finally wandering to Market Square. Here a young surveyor by the name of Washington had helped to plan the city streets. Later, as the owner of Mount Vernon, he had sent produce from the fields to be sold here on the Square.

"It seems that, wherever we go, we can't escape George Washington," Amy said with a wry laugh to Mark. But he was preoccupied with Glynia, who had twisted her ankle on the brick paving and was leaning on his shoulder for support as he examined her high-heeled sandal.

"We've run into Washington everywhere ourselves," Rob commented, and proceeded to tell about his family's first sight of the capital city, floodlighted in the darkness.

"I saw it for the first time last night too," Amy responded, her spirits lifting at the memory. When Rob gave her a curious look, she hurried on, "I started my research for the Washington report today. Tell me everything you think I should see."

Rob appeared pleased to be asked and lost no time in outlining an itinerary, though Amy had covered many of the sites already.

They continued to stroll through the delightful old town on their way down to the Potomac River. Lovely as the evening was, Amy felt relieved

Washington's honor . . . and, from the steps of this restaurant, he reviewed infantry volunteers. As one might suppose, many a heated debate took place here between loyalists and patriots."

Thom's pompous delivery brought a round of applause, and, as Rob helped her out of the car, Amy devoutly hoped that the historic building would not be the setting for any heated debates tonight. She felt more and more uncomfortable, particularly with Rob at her side and Mark uneasily gravitating toward Glynia. But what else could Mark do? Amy reminded herself with a wistful glance at the striking couple.

Inside, a maître d' in early American garb greeted them, checked their reservations, and led them through the pale green colonial rooms to their table.

Rob seated Amy, who was enthusiastic over the old restaurant. "To use a cliché," she said, "it's as if we've stepped into the pages of history."

"It's so different for Californians," Rob mused as he settled into the chair beside her. "We're more accustomed to Spanish land grants and mission history. Here, there's more of a feeling of national history. You should see where we're staying in Washington —"

As he enthused over their accommodations, Amy took note of the seating arrangement. Mark was seated to her right at the head of the table, Glynia on the other side of him, flanked by Thom and then Valerie at the other end. From the way Glynia was holding Mark's attention with something about a new modeling assignment in Egypt, onlookers would assume they were together . . . and that Amy was with Rob.

A waiter in colonial attire handed her the menu with a flourish. "Good evening, milady."

"Good evening, sir." She would enjoy herself no matter how difficult the evening might be, she decided.

After she ordered prime rib, Rob launched into an animated travelogue, detailing the sights they had encountered on his family's first cross-country trip. He made it so interesting that Amy almost wished she had been with them. Perhaps she was making a mistake, she thought, making a quick assessment of Mark.

As if reading her mind, Mark turned a questioning look on her, holding her gaze so warmly that she might have been in his arms. No — she had made no mistake. Mark was the man she loved. And he had said he was falling in love with her, even if he hadn't quite been willing to pronounce the more definitive *I love you.*

Yet, as the evening progressed, Glynia's presence made the time increasingly unpleasant. Not only was her interest in Mark obvious, but her beauty was breathtaking, drawing the attention of other diners in the room. How could Mark resist her wiles? Her coy chatter was directed exclusively to him. And when he attempted to draw Amy into the conversation, Glynia pouted.

By the time coffee and dessert were served, the woman finally deigned to

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At seven o'clock the family gathered in Aunt Alicia's parlor, as she called the elegant room in which the wedding would take place on Sunday. Mark and Thom had already rearranged the antique furniture to accommodate the string quintet. Although everyone was dressed for dinner out, Catherine had coaxed the men into making further minor adjustments to the furniture arrangement.

"If you could just move the chair that way a trifle and the couch back a few inches —"

There was a general round of laughter.

As the doorbell rang Thom was teasing, "Let's practice the 'You-may-now-kiss-the-bride.' "

"Oh, you two!" his mother chided as she hurried to answer the door. The elder Marstons and Aunt Alicia would be dining out with relatives at the club where tomorrow night's rehearsal dinner was to take place. "Glynia! And here comes Rob too!"

Amy was wearing a favorite off-white linen dress, but felt she might disappear into the woodwork after one look at Glynia. Provocative was not a strong enough word for her smashing jade green silk dress with its halter neckline and side slits. Rob, on the other hand, was sedately dressed in a new tan suit.

"Hi, Amy," he said, his brown eyes shining with pleasure as he stepped into the room. She had forgotten how attractive he was.

Within minutes they were outside, heading for Aunt Alicia's silver Mercedes, which she had urged upon them. "I'll drive," Mark offered, "so you lovebirds can sit together."

With a flash of lovely slim legs, Glynia quickly slid in beside him while Amy looked on helplessly. Rob appeared as discomfited as she, but helped her in beside Glynia before joining Val and Thom in the back seat. It did not seem an auspicious beginning. Fortunately it was a short ride to the historic restaurant through the gracious tree-lined streets of Alexandria.

As they parked the car Thom, who had dined at Gadsby's Tavern before, expounded on its background. "In the 1700s," he began in exaggerated tour-guide style, "this was already a famous restaurant in which Washington, Jefferson, and Henry Clay dined. It was also the scene of a ball held in

"Tired?" Mark asked as he eased the car into traffic on the George Washington Parkway.

"A little," she admitted, "and sad, too, that so many have died for our country's freedom."

He shrugged. "Everyone has to die sometime . . . at least they died for a cause greater than themselves."

"I suppose that's more than most of us do, but it's still so sad. It reminds me . . ."

"Of your grandfather?" His tone was compassionate.

Her voice broke unexpectedly. "Yes . . . and my parents."

Mark studied the traffic thoughtfully. "My grandfather used to quote from the Book of Revelation: 'And God shall wipe all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying; neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things have passed away.' "

She gazed at him in surprise. "And you remember that after all these years?"

"I remember a lot of things he told me," Mark replied.

the "Apotheosis," honoring George Washington. Below, eight historical paintings by early American artists depicted scenes from the lives of Columbus, Pocahontas, and the Pilgrims.

"Here in this Rotunda," the tour guide said, "American heroes have lain in flag-draped coffins . . . unknown soldiers and martyred leaders . . . Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley, and Kennedy."

Amy glanced at her fellow tourists; most seemed as awed as she to be here. Then it was time to move on again. Throughout the building there were statues of eminent Americans from Daniel Webster and Jefferson Davis to Will Rogers.

In the Senate corridors, they admired the elaborate murals by Brumidi. Congress was not in session, and the imposing chambers of the Senate and House of Congress were occupied only by tourists and their guides who spoke in English, French, German, Spanish, and Japanese. Amy picked up a smattering of information, enough to know that the guides were explaining the workings of the United States Government. Yes, most definitely, American Holidays' tourists must have time for a stop in these chambers. Even after her tour group disbanded, Amy wandered on through the Capitol, reluctant to leave.

When she glanced at her watch again, she realized that she would be late to meet Mark, and she rushed out to the Hirshhorn Museum. There would be no time to view the contemporary artwork inside today, though the outdoor sculpture garden with its many statues would surely intrigue modern art aficionados. She arrived out of breath, then saw to her relief that Mark was just arriving too.

"How did it go?" he asked.

"Too fast, but wonderfully."

He tucked her hand in the warm crook of his arm. "Even without me?"

"Well, of course, it would have been better with you."

He smiled with pleasure. "There's time to stop by the Jefferson Monument, and maybe Arlington Cemetery if we hurry."

Later, they admired the great white marble memorial to Thomas Jefferson, modeled after the Pantheon in Rome. According to the guidebooks, the low rounded dome and classical pediment leading to the interior resembled the architectural style of Jefferson's home, Monticello.

"Monticello is another place some of our tourists have said they would like to visit," Mark mentioned.

"On the extended tours, I hope!"

Before long, they were driving across Memorial Bridge and then into the gates of Arlington National Cemetery. Its historic Custis-Lee Mansion was lovely, and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the Iwo Jima statue were impressive, but it was the rows upon rows of grave markers that touched Amy with their mute but heart-rending display. A sobering end to the day, she thought as they began their homeward drive to Alexandria.

The day flew as they investigated the Smithsonian Institute, which she learned was comprised of buildings scattered about the city. They began in the Museum of American History with its intriguing collection of Americana: memorabilia of the presidents, Alexander Graham Bell's first telephone, Edison's light bulb, folk art, and a railroad hall with a huge green locomotive from the 1920s, an automotive hall with vintage cars and turn-of-the-century horseless buggies, and far, far more. Amy especially enjoyed an exhibit of the gowns worn by America's First Ladies.

"Your foreign female tourists will love seeing the gowns," she remarked.

"And the men," Mark added with a chuckle, "will be crazy about the Air and Space Museum."

Next door was the Museum of Natural History, featuring a huge African elephant in the rotunda, flanked by exhibit halls of dinosaurs, marine life, birds, and mammals. The Hall of Gems sparkled with stunning gems, including the astonishing Hope Diamond with over forty-five carats.

As they left Amy said wistfully, "It would take at least half a day in each museum to do them justice! Most of your foreign tourists will have only a fleeting glimpse."

"Unfortunately, that's all most American tourists have time for too."

After lunch in the National Gallery of Art's cavernous underground cafeteria, Mark dropped a kiss on her forehead. "I'll meet you in the sculpture garden at the Hirshhorn Museum at three-thirty. Sure you can find it?"

The location was circled on her detailed map. "Positive," she said, so radiant that he decided to kiss her again.

"I shall return," he vowed.

"Another great American made that statement, as I recall," she quipped. "I hope you're as reliable as he was."

Buoyed up by happiness, she hurried on, grateful that there would be time next week to inspect many more of the intriguing buildings and exhibits. Today she definitely had to view the Capitol, the most dominant and magnificent sight on the Mall.

Throngs of tourists — many of them in groups from abroad, chattering in their native tongues — climbed the steps of the Capitol with her, bringing to mind American Holidays, Inc. Mark's clients would want to know that the gleaming dome echoed those of Old World structures — St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and St. Paul's Cathedral in London. They would most likely be interested, too, in the fact that Constantino Brumidi, an Italian painter and muralist who had fled persecution in Italy had made significant contributions throughout the Capitol building.

Inside, Amy joined a tour group and followed along through the series of grand chambers connected by a maze of passageways and corridors. When they reached the central Rotunda, she marveled with the others at Brumidi's masterwork, the decoration of the dome: a huge allegorical painting called

With time at a premium, they chose the elevator for their descent from the top of the Washington Monument, too, then headed for the White House through a stand of trees and across Constitution Avenue. Ahead was the Ellipse, a park dotted with numerous small monuments, park benches, and trees. After a while, they joined the line of tourists waiting to purchase White House tour tickets. While they waited, a Dixieland band entertained them with its lively music.

"How will I ever keep it all straight?" Amy asked in consternation. "We've barely begun and, according to this map, around the corner are the State Department, National Academy of Science, Constitution Hall —"

"You'll do a fine job."

Mark's confidence was reassuring, but there was so much to cover. So far, with Mark squiring her around, it had been easy. But he had an appointment this afternoon. After he had purchased the tickets, she trailed behind him, jotting notes.

"Look," he said quietly, placing a hand on her shoulder.

There in the distance, through the high black wrought-iron fence, was the White House; it nestled serenely behind a sprawling lawn dotted with trees, fountains, and colorful flower beds. "How perfect it is," she commented, "grand and elegant, yet simple and private too. Precisely the kind of house for an American president."

"The architect was inspired by eighteenth-century French country houses."

"Country *houses?* It seems more like a mansion!"

"Executive mansion it is," he responded with a smile, obviously enjoying their tour as much as she. "We'll circle around for a better view."

On their way, they walked by the statue of Winged Victory poised upon a tall column, then turned northwest and passed the Old Executive Office Building, a gray Victorian megalith that filled an entire city block. Dark-suited dignitaries streamed in through security checkpoints.

"Just another day at the office?" Amy inquired dryly.

Amused, Mark replied with a laugh. "Just another day at the office."

Moments later, they were approaching Pennsylvania Avenue, then Lafayette Square, where statues of Revolutionary War heroes and old cannons stood among beds of flowers.

Later, as they stood in line with the colorful crowd near the White House, the air seemed to vibrate with anticipation, intensifying as they moved along to the North Portico. Once inside the impressive mansion, they moved through at a breathtaking pace. There were priceless remnants of the past: antique furniture, chandeliers, paintings. The Blue Room . . . the Red Room . . . the East Room . . . the Green Room — Amy could almost sense the presence of Adams and Lincoln, Roosevelt and Truman as she walked down the hallowed halls. So much to see and no time to take notes. It seemed only a few minutes before they were outside again.

Amy turned in alarm to catch the wicked gleam in his eye. "— that all newcomers are required to climb to the top of every monument."

"Good!" she laughed, darting just out of his reach. She almost danced across the green carpet to the base of the monument. "I need the exercise!"

Climbing the wide expanse of marble steps, Amy noted the reverent hush as a group of tourists neared the temple's platform and the formidable white statue of the martyred president. Above Lincoln's head, Amy read the words: *In this temple as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the union the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever.* Despite his homeliness, the bearded, lanky backwoodsman from Illinois had become a great luminary.

Lincoln's watchful gaze appeared to be directed across the shimmering ribbon of water of the Reflecting Pool toward the obelisk piercing the sky — the Washington Monument. And, after a few moments of quiet contemplation, they descended the steps to walk the grassy path to that famous shrine.

Fifty American flags surrounding the monument fluttered in the breeze, again bringing a catch to Amy's throat. At its base, a long line of anxious tourists awaited the elevator ride to the top.

"Do we have time to go up?" she asked.

"Absolutely. It's one of our most important stops — the perfect place to learn the layout of the city. When we traveled in Europe as kids, we always had to climb to the top of the highest building to get the lay of the land."

"Poor Catherine. How did she put up with the two of you?"

"She loved it as much as we did," he returned.

"I guess she would." Shielding her eyes with her hand, Amy gazed upward in dismay. "Still, I'm glad we have an elevator!"

"You can walk down."

She shook her head. "No, thanks. I've an idea I'd better conserve my energy!"

The line to the elevator moved rapidly and before long they were at the top of the monument, overlooking the city. To the west, the Lincoln Memorial; to the east down the Mall, the Capitol Building; to the north, the serene beauty of the White House; and to the south across the Tidal Basin, the pristine Jefferson Memorial. The length of the Mall leading to the Capitol was lined by palatial buildings which Amy recognized from pictures she had seen, including the Smithsonian Institute and the National Gallery of Art. "I could stay up here all day," she said.

"Afraid you'll just have to capture it with your camera," Mark said, looking as pleased as she felt.

After she had snapped pictures, he slipped an arm around her shoulders. "And this is just the beginning."

She shivered, knowing that he referred to the sights of Washington, but wishing this were *just the beginning* of their love — that it would stretch on forever, like the great canopy of blue sky overarching the nation's capital.

the dining room. Dr. Marston rose to greet them. "What's so hilarious already this morning?" he inquired.

Thom's eyes darted audaciously to Amy, then to Mark, who drew a threatening finger along his throat. Thinking better of betraying their kiss, Thom answered evasively, "I regret to say, sir, that it is highly classified information."

"I suppose we'll be hearing that line often now that you'll be working in Washington," Dr. Marston said with a chuckle, then nodded toward the buffet. "Breakfast is waiting. We're to help ourselves since the other ladies are plotting our course for the weekend."

The buffet offered orange juice, fresh strawberries and melons as well as silver-lidded dishes containing steaming scrambled eggs, sausages, hashed brown potatoes, and English muffins. Amy served herself, taking pleasure in Mark's presence just behind her and in the consciousness of being so lovingly accepted by his entire family.

Rob phoned during breakfast. "I thought you might like to explore Washington with me and my folks."

"Sorry," Amy replied, less than truthfully, "but I'll be working on a report. We'll be having dinner in Alexandria's Old Town tonight — that is, Val and Thom, and Mark and Glynia and I. You're joining us, aren't you?"

"Sure, but I had hoped —" He could not quite conceal a trace of disappointment. "Where and when?"

Half an hour later, Amy and Mark drove through Alexandria and along the Potomac River into Arlington. To the west rose the green hills of Arlington National Cemetery crowned by the Custis-Lee Mansion. They turned onto the Arlington Memorial Bridge, which was flanked by great golden statues.

Mark's voice deepened with pride. "And here we are in Washington again."

Despite last night's wondrous sights, Amy's throat tightened to see the city by day — the great white monuments and buildings gleaming in the morning sun above the green grass and trees of Potomac Park. As Mark parked the car near the Lincoln Memorial, her anticipation and excitement grew. Cars, tour buses, a tourmobile, and throngs of tourists converged on the spot.

She grabbed her handbag and notebook, and quickly let herself out of the car to study the classical lines of the monument, so like a Greek temple. There was dignity and strength befitting a president like Abraham Lincoln.

Mark caught her hand in his. "Impressive?"

"Now that's an understatement! I really had no idea that Washington would be such an . . . an emotional experience."

Mark brought her hand to his lips and kissed her fingertips. "Then I'm definitely glad to be the first to show you the city. . . . The only problem is —"

had household and gardening help, and caterers would furnish the food.

Right after breakfast Amy planned to plunge into her report on Washington, D.C. Mark had scheduled an interview with a tour agency manager in the afternoon, but they would be able to spend a major portion of the day together.

Half an hour later, she took a final glance in the mirror mounted in a dark antique stand. Despite all of the rushing about, she seemed to be holding up rather well, she thought with satisfaction. Her white dress contrasted effectively with her hair, which she had twisted loosely at the crown of her head again. Looking more closely into the mirror, she noticed that her eyes were a deeper shade of turquoise than usual — anticipation, no doubt.

As she stepped into the long second-floor hallway, Mark was just starting down the stairs. "Good morning," he said, his eyes lighting up at the sight of her. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Well, good morning, yourself." Her heart must have been in her eyes because he stepped back up the stairs and strode toward her, catching her in his arms.

"Oh, Amy!" he whispered before his lips sought hers. Nothing about his actions gave any indication that he might be contemplating a retreat now, she thought before surrendering to his kiss.

"Ahem," Mark's brother interrupted, running his fingers self-consciously through his mop of auburn hair. "Just call me Peeping Thom. Somehow I always manage to stumble in at just the wrong moment — or maybe it's the right moment. Whatever, it looks just fine to me!"

Startled, Amy pulled away, feeling blood rush to her cheeks.

Mark laughed, though his tan face had darkened a shade too. "Your timing couldn't be worse. You might have done the gentlemanly thing and taken the window exit. It's only a one-story jump —"

"Now that's carrying brotherly love too far," Thom protested, giving Mark an affectionate jab in the ribs. "Besides, how would Valerie feel if her groom arrived at the altar with two broken legs? On the other hand, a silver-handled cane might add some dash to the wedding pictures."

They laughed at his running banter as the three of them made their way down the stairs. Catherine had often attributed Thom's facility with words to that same streak of Irish in their blood that had colored their hair such an unusual shade of auburn.

At the foot of the stairs Thom drew himself up. "My dear brother, it is my duty to point out that you are again wearing the lady's lipstick."

"Spoken like a true Southern diplomat," Mark responded with a grin as he reached for his handkerchief. "I predict you're destined for political greatness."

Amy might have blushed again if their further drolleries hadn't set them all laughing.

The rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee beckoned, and they continued to

nation's dream — and that dream had come true. Sitting close to Mark, Amy dared hope that another lifelong dream might come true as well.

The next morning, in Aunt Alicia's stately Georgian house in Alexandria, Virginia, Amy was awakened by a persistent ray of sun beaming through the leaded glass windows. Valerie's twin bed was already made, which meant she was probably already busy downstairs with rehearsal dinner and wedding plans.

Last night when Amy and Mark had arrived, Val had eyed them curiously before mentioning that Rob and Glynia were already registered at nearby hotels, hoping to join them tonight for dinner.

"Fine," Mark had agreed. "The four of us can make an evening of it here in Alexandria, or try one of the new restaurants in Washington."

"Hey, how about Val and me?" Thom complained.

"Don't you two lovebirds want to be alone?" Aunt Alicia chided. The stylish platinum-blond widow with twinkling brown eyes was exactly as Catherine had portrayed her — a love.

Valerie laughingly slipped her arm through Thom's. "Oh, he's afraid he's going to be stuck with me all the way to the hereafter."

"Afraid!" Aunt Alicia responded with an incredulous smile. "I should think he'd be bursting with joy to have found himself such a lovely bride."

"I am . . . oh, I am!" Thom shook his head hopelessly. "I'm such an anomaly that I don't even have the sense to be a nervous bridegroom. Not a single sign of cold feet."

Catherine and James Marston led the laughter, and Amy's gaze wandered to Mark. Just as she had expected, he had not joined in the good-natured ribbing. He wasn't at all comfortable with the subject of marriage. Now a new thought troubled her. Though she had openly declared her love for Mark, he had only mentioned that he was falling in love with her. She had arrived at the final destination, but he was merely underway . . . possibly even hanging back to simplify a retreat. Why did she have to love the brother with cold feet!

Time to get up, Amy prompted herself. She slipped out of bed, determined to set aside last night's memory.

Outside, sunshine slanted across the grounds, and a mockingbird sang from atop a brick wall laden with red roses. Arriving so late last night, she had scarcely noticed the charming garden, though she had taken note of the fine English antiques in her and Val's room. She noted now that her white crinkled cotton dress hung outside the closet for today's sightseeing. Fortunately it would not require pressing.

She hurried to the shower, mentally reviewing what she would be wearing for dinner tonight, tomorrow night's rehearsal dinner, and the wedding on Sunday. Everything seemed to be in order. A maid would be on hand later to press any wrinkles from the wedding finery. She knew, too, that Aunt Alicia

to Washington — past and present, brochures on the Smithsonian, the White House, the Capitol, and more . . . far more than she had realized. "I don't see how I'll cover it all in a few days."

"We'll have tomorrow for an overview, but there won't be any work this weekend . . . we do have a wedding to attend. By the middle of next week, we should be able to wrap up the Washington report. Most of our tourists have only a day or two to spend in the city, and I've been there often enough to direct you to the highlights. So it shouldn't be a problem."

"Thank goodness!"

"Uh, while we're on the subject, could I coerce you into doing a report on Boston when I'm there?"

She laughed in astonishment. "Oh, I don't think it would take much coercion."

He cast a sidelong glance at her. "Good. I've been thinking about expanding a few of the tours to Canada too. But that wouldn't be until August or so. How does that strike you?"

"As if I'm going to wake up any moment! This seems so incredible. I don't know what I've done to deserve it."

Mark smiled at her pleasure. "You've made me very happy — that's what you've done."

"And I thought it was my writing skills!"

He chuckled. "That, too."

"Then I'd better start learning all I can about Washington." She happily turned to peruse the literature in her lap.

Nearing Washington, Mark suggested, "Let's stop for dinner. I'm sure they've already eaten at Aunt Alicia's . . . besides, I'm not ready to share you with the others yet. There's an intimate little restaurant in Georgetown beside the canal —"

"Sounds wonderful. I accept with pleasure."

"You're right," he teased, "a fellow doesn't have to use much coercion on you."

"Well . . . I don't know about that! I'm usually not all that accommodating to fellows in general. The thing to keep in mind is that *this* fellow is you."

He caught her hand in his and held it against his cheek, sobering. "I'm glad you haven't been accommodating — very glad, Amy."

Their candlelit dinner was indeed wonderful, as was the leisurely nighttime drive into the center of the nation's capital. Despite the many pictures she had seen of Washington, Amy was unprepared for the tide of emotion she experienced at the sight arising from the darkness. Floodlights struck the grandeur of white marble: the Lincoln Memorial . . . Washington Monument . . . Jefferson Memorial . . . the White House . . . the Capitol. Old and familiar words suddenly gained new meaning: . . . *to the republic for which it stands . . . one nation, under God . . . with liberty and justice for all.* These splendid white monuments, silhouetted against the night sky, were part of a

He drew her hand to his mouth and kissed it. "If my family knew how I've been treating you, they'd never forgive me."

"But it's my fault too . . . and they'll never know — unless you tell them. Besides, there have been so many happy moments too."

"When, for instance?"

"Just being with you," she said simply, "and sometimes when you look at me without those sunglasses on. You must have the most beautiful blue eyes in the world."

He grinned.

Something within her compelled her to say, "I love you, Mark."

A kaleidoscope of emotions rushed across his face. "Don't you know you should never admit that you love a man?"

"I guess I don't know a great deal about men," she confessed.

"Thank goodness for that! Though I'm not sure there's ever been a woman alive who didn't intuitively know more about men than they do about themselves."

She removed his right hand from the steering wheel and kissed it. "Maybe I'm an exception."

He smiled. "After that display, I doubt it very much."

She rested her cheek against the warmth of his hand. Loving him did seem the most natural thing in the world. But then she'd had a great deal of experience at that — since she was seven, at least.

As they drove over the great bridge connecting Delaware Bay with Chesapeake Bay, she set the unhappy memories firmly behind her, basking in the warmth of the moment — and the splendor of the scenery. There were inlets grown thick with reed and cattails, then the Kent Narrows Bridge, and finally the majestic silvery Bay Bridge, thrusting itself skyward over the blue waters of the bay. As they crossed the bridge, great sea-going freighters, naval vessels, sleek yachts, and tiny sailboats moved below them on the watery thoroughfare.

The sight caused Amy's conscience to gnaw at her. "Time to start thinking about my report on Washington."

"There's a manila envelope full of literature on it in my briefcase."

Amy unbuckled her seat belt and leaned over the back seat. Catching his knowing grin, she was reminded of that other day when, in the same precarious position, she had been thrown against Mark's shoulder with an electrifying jolt. Hurriedly, she retrieved the sleek black case and settled herself in her seat.

Still grinning, he apparently chose to ignore that earlier incident. "It took me by surprise to discover you were a beautiful young woman the day I picked you up at your grandfather's house . . . no longer little Amy."

"No longer *chubby* Amy, you mean," she amended.

They chatted easily about the past while she extracted the literature from the manila envelope and sorted through it. There were maps, guides

entire trip has flown by so quickly."

"Yes . . . far too quickly." His dark glasses disguised his intentions so effectively that she was surprised when he reached for her hand. Reason warned her to pull away, but his hopeful smile deterred her. "I'm afraid you can't really trust me," he said, "I'm as confused and torn by all of this as you must be."

"I want to trust you, Mark, but I don't understand. . . ." Her voice quavered threateningly and she forced herself to continue, "I just don't understand what's been happening with you!"

He slowed the car, pulling off onto the shoulder of the road and stopping. After shifting into neutral, he gazed at her thoughtfully. "What's been happening is that I've been falling in love with you more and more every day."

"Oh, Mark — are you sure?"

"I'm sure, very sure." Gathering her into his arms, she was only vaguely aware of the restraint of the seat belt. As their lips met, her heart overflowed with forgiveness for the anguish she had endured. The car, idling under them, intensified the fervor of their kiss, and she scarcely heard the blaring horns of cars whizzing by. This time there had been no hesitation in his voice. This time he had clearly stated, *I've been falling in love with you.*

If only this blissful moment could last forever . . . if only nothing ever came between them again. But a niggling doubt zigzagged through her mind and quite suddenly her lips trembled. As Mark pulled away in surprise, she burst into sobs.

"What is it?" he asked with concern. "What's wrong?"

"I can't imagine what got into me," she apologized, reaching for a tissue to blot her tears. What an unromantic spectacle she had made of herself.

"I must admit, crying was not quite the response I expected," he said, his eyes full of consternation. "Are my kisses so bad?"

Smiling tearfully, she shook her head. "They're wonderful! I don't know what's wrong with me. . . . I'm sorry, Mark."

He let out a deep breath. "Well, I think I know, and I must have been an idiot not to see it before. You've been under too much emotional strain since the San Francisco trip . . . for the last few months, for that matter. With your grandfather's death, selling his house, finding an apartment, getting ready for Val's wedding . . . and now me . . . well, it would be too much for anyone. I'm afraid I haven't helped at all." He turned from her and shifted the car into gear. "*I'm* the one who's sorry." Glancing behind them, he swung the car back onto the road and accelerated with a burst of speed fueled by his self-contempt.

"You are not an idiot!" she protested. "I think you're just as confused as I am by . . . by all of this."

He kept his eyes on the road. "But that doesn't make it fair for me to tear you apart too!"

She slipped her hand under his on the steering wheel. "I'll be all right now. I promise, I'll be all right."

9

Despite the unpleasant circumstances of her arrival in Philadelphia, Amy regretted the time for their departure. The city had been fascinating beyond her expectations, and she had enjoyed last night's dinner as she and Mark slowly, almost wordlessly, made amends.

"I really liked the Engles," she said, gazing out at the passing scenery.

"So did I," Mark agreed. "Ed seems just right for the job."

After a morning interview with Ed Engle, Mark and Amy had taken Ed and his wife out for dinner in the evening. The topics of conversation had ranged far beyond the tourist industry. The attractive couple had even introduced the subject of religion.

Donna Engle, an amber-eyed redhead, had enthused, "Our marriage, which was fast becoming a disaster, changed when we accepted Christ as our Savior. In fact, our newfound faith has changed our entire lives!"

"It's made that much difference?" Mark asked, genuinely interested.

Ed Engle, so darkly attractive that he occasionally performed in local television commercials, fondly squeezed his wife's hand.

"I'd have never believed it myself. I was always on the fringes of the church, trying to edge in occasionally, but I had such a mistaken impression of Christianity. I suppose that's common when you're on the outside looking in." He chuckled. "If I'd known what an adventure it would be, I'd have turned my life over to the Lord years ago!"

Amy hoped to hear more, but Mark quickly maneuvered the conversation around to the tour agency business. It struck her again that he seemed determined to avoid the subject of religion. Yet at the end of the evening, he hired Ed as his new agent for Philadelphia, despite Ed's lack of expertise with foreign tourists.

Mark explained after the Engles left them in the hotel lobby, "I suppose I really hired Ed because I trust him, and trust in an employee is money in the bank." He had darted a look at her. "It seems that not everyone is trustworthy."

Now what did he mean by that? she reflected later in her room. That he had been throwing out confusing signals? That he had let her down?

Now, driving toward Delaware Bay, they discussed the upcoming wedding. "Can it only be three days away?" Amy asked with amazement. "This

jammed with tourists and locals, many of them dining in pairs, and she felt saddened to be alone when it was just the sort of place one wanted to share. The restaurant's historic decor took her back to days of tall-masted ships at the river, horsedrawn wagons pulling loads of goods, horses and buggies, and children rolling hoops through colonial crowds.

After lunch she arrived at the old red brick Christ Church, from which an ornate white steeple pointed skyward. Stopping in the small gift shop to pick up a brochure and post cards, she was astonished to learn that among those who had worshiped here were George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and many other signers of the Declaration of Independence, seven of whom lay buried in the adjacent cemetery.

As Amy stepped into the simple white interior of the church, a hush fell within her. She walked slowly up the middle aisle toward what the brochure called the first Palladian window in the country, stopping at George Washington's pew. Alone in the church, she saw no reason why she might not sit down in it; she sank onto the red cushion. A brass plaque proclaimed:

Here worshiped George Washington,
General-in-Chief of the Continental Armies
First President of the United States
Martha Washington
from 1770-1797
The pew was voted by the vestry in 1797 to the
use of
John Adams
Second President of the United States
It was occupied at a religious service by
Lafayette
on his second visit to America, 1824.

The signers of the Declaration of Independence had certainly been a godly group, she thought with some surprise. Had they, too, experienced the peace and tranquility she felt here now?

Late in the afternoon when Amy returned to her room, a phone message was waiting. Mark would meet her in the lobby at seven o'clock for dinner.

Trying to subdue tremors of agitation, she reminded herself of the fiasco in San Francisco with Tony and his pick-up date. *Oh, please,* she found herself praying, *please, God, don't let this evening turn out so wretchedly too.*

very spot, where the streets looked like illustrations in history books she had read as a child.

Finding a bench in Independence Square, she pulled out her research notes. It was from here that the Declaration of Independence had first been read publicly in July 1776. Indeed, Philadelphia had been the nation's first capital. John Adams had called the city "happy, peaceful, elegant, and hospitable." As she sat there pondering those words, she felt that they were still true at least in part, for she felt a sense of deep peace.

At length, she checked the map. Tonight she would locate the historical building recommended for tourists and wander along the Delaware River; tomorrow she would cover the tours. As she stood up to leave, Amy felt a bit of a spring in her step, a hint of renewed energy.

When darkness fell she returned to the hotel, pleased to have made so much progress with her research. Exhausted, yet feeling vestiges of her earlier tranquility, Amy decided to skip dinner and fall into bed. She opened her door and flicked on the light switch. Then she saw it on her dresser — a huge bouquet of red roses.

Her chest felt suddenly constricted and her thoughts tumbled wildly. The fragrance of the magnificent roses overwhelmed her, and her fingers trembled as she reached for the card. *Please forgive me,* it read, and was signed simply, *Mark.*

Happiness began to surge through her, but she caught herself up short. How could she possibly risk being hurt again? Whenever she was too available, he backed off. It was wiser not to rush into his arms. Besides, it was entirely possible that Mark's simple request for forgiveness did not imply love, that he was only interested in patching up their friendship. But why would he send her *red* roses — a symbol of love? She debated the possibilities endlessly until at last she changed into her nightgown and lay down exhausted in bed.

The next morning Amy carried the memory of the roses with her to breakfast, but there was no sign of Mark in the hotel coffee shop. Disappointed, she turned to mapping her course for the day: Independence Square tours including the Liberty Bell, Dolly Todd Madison's house, Betsy Ross's house, Christ Church, Elfreth's Alley, Head House Square, a fast lunch at the famous Bookbinders' Restaurant, then over to the City Hall Tower — for a unique view of the downtown area — and, last, the Council for International Visitors. How could she possibly see it all? She'd need to get started.

After the excellent introductory film at the Independence Square Visitors' Center, her timing for each tour was perfect. Everywhere she looked there was a bit of history. If only her report could convey the excitement she was feeling.

At noon, while lunching on delicious clam chowder at Bookbinders' near the wharf, Amy especially missed Mark. The popular restaurant was

"Oh, no?" she remarked heatedly. "Then why the silent treatment since Valley Forge?"

"I've been thinking —"

"Well, so have I!" she flung back. "I've been thinking that you're all for love as long as you don't get too close to a —" She almost said "lifelong commitment," but bit off the words.

"To what?" he demanded.

"Too close emotionally."

There was a thoughtful pause. "Maybe you're right, but this is not the world's best time for discussing the matter — not in the middle of this traffic."

"We had plenty of time on the way!" she fumed. What was wrong with her? Her emotions roiled on from anger and hurt to regret. "Oh, why can't we get along? What triggered the fight *this* time?"

"I believe I mentioned a dinner engagement," he replied blandly.

Feeling hopelessly childish, she peered out the window, scarcely seeing the rush-hour activity. She hadn't wanted to make this trip with him to Philadelphia in the first place, but he had coaxed and wheedled and kissed her until she had agreed. Well, she wasn't the first foolish woman who had fallen in love with her boss. Erika had been another —

Mark interrupted her thoughts. "Very honestly, after the scene you made in San Francisco over Tony and his date, I was afraid you wouldn't appreciate the man I'm interviewing tonight."

"The scene *I* made? What about *them?*"

Silence hung heavy between them during the remainder of the drive through the city. Finally Mark pulled up in the registration parking space of a red brick Georgian colonial hotel, and Amy let herself out of the car.

"I'd prefer to register myself. No more suites." She waited a moment for Mark's reaction, but when he said nothing, she hurried on, "In fact, I want to be on an entirely different floor!"

It seemed to take forever to process her registration and transfer her luggage to the room. But when she was at last alone, Amy threw herself onto the bed and cried out her anger and frustration. When the phone rang, she was sobbing too hard to answer; besides, she wasn't about to give Mark the satisfaction of knowing she had shed a single tear over him!

Finally, she wiped her eyes and blew her nose. The best thing to do at a time like this was to take a long hot shower. That therapy had been known to bring her emotions under control before.

Later, she changed into white slacks and a peach sleeveless knit shirt. Donning dark glasses, she hurried outside. It was only a few blocks to Independence Square, and, as she walked, her spirits lifted. Whether it was the brilliant sky or the soft June breeze blowing around the old red brick buildings that bestowed the calming effect, she didn't know; perhaps it was the ambience of a bygone era. Suddenly she felt a kinship with those other women from the past who might have experienced similar heartaches in this

She opened her eyes slowly, hoping that something miraculous had happened. But nothing seemed to have changed except that the woman with the crutches was gone. The chapel was just as it had been before, though not as serene now that a group of school children had filed in with their teachers. Rising, Amy started for the chancel door, stopping only for a final glimpse — to capture the chapel's beauty in her memory.

Outside, Mark sat in the car, his impatient look making it plain that not only had he been waiting for some time, but that nothing had changed with him, either.

As they followed the drive that wound along beside the Schuylkill River, Amy noticed that smokestacks were interspersed with the church spires and housetops protruding above the trees. "Apparently Philadelphia's old settlements were built along the river for navigation and power in those days," Amy said into the silence between them.

"Typical of the old eastern cities," Mark returned evenly, his eyes on the expressway traffic. "It's still a major seaport today. The Schuylkill runs into the Delaware River at the edge of the city."

"So I see on the map." She felt like a schoolgirl receiving instruction from her tutor. Mark seemed determined to remain remote. She jotted down some notes.

Before long they were in downtown Philadelphia — a thoroughly modern city — and there was City Hall, topped by its famous statue of William Penn.

Caught in a traffic jam, Mark idled the motor of the Corvette. "We're staying near Independence Hall. I have a dinner appointment at seven, but you shouldn't have any trouble finding your way around after I get you oriented."

"Oh, I wouldn't think of putting you to the trouble," Amy insisted. "I'm quite capable of taking care of myself. Little Amy isn't as helpless as you may think." The moment the words were out, she wished that she could recall them.

Mark cast a skeptical look at her and turned back to the traffic, which was finally beginning to move. "I have an interview with a tour agent."

"You don't owe me any explanations. This is strictly business." But she couldn't help thinking that if he had wanted to be with her, he would have found a way.

Mark swung the car into the fast lane. "Tomorrow night I'd like you to join me. We'll be entertaining a couple."

"Don't feel that you have to include me."

"Amy —?" He touched her hand tentatively, and she pulled it away, turning to gaze out of her window at the City of Brotherly Love. How ironic, she thought, when she and Mark were engaged in a bitter cold war.

"Listen, Amy," Mark began, "it's my fault that our little discussion has been blown out of proportion. I wanted to back off — but not this far."

carved and gilded cross; above the cross, an archway of stained-glass panels enhanced the gemlike magnificence of the place.

Amy held her breath. Though this was a sight to impress Mark's foreign visitors, there was more to the memorial chapel than its beauty. She sensed instinctively an aura of peace and joy and . . . grace . . . though the meaning of the word eluded her.

She dropped her eyes to the elegant gothic pews, carved in what was possibly walnut. A brass plaque on the side of one of the pews read: "To the glory of God," then listed a memorial name. Moving from pew to pew, Amy saw that the words were repeated, like a litany: "To the glory of God." How many loved ones had grieved over the deaths of those who had died for the sake of creating this country? How many hearts had been broken? Yet they had been able to dedicate those lives "to the glory of God."

As she recorded her impressions, Amy was vaguely aware of a woman sitting in a nearby pew. When she looked up again, she noticed that a pair of crutches was propped against the end of the pew. The woman was smiling, her eyes so full of love and light that her face seemed luminescent. There was an ethereal quality about her that reminded Amy of the great old paintings of the saints. Was it true that suffering could bring one closer to God, enabling joy to transcend pain?

Amy moved on toward a prominent wall plaque, finding George Washington's prayer for the country. "Almighty God, we make our earnest prayer that Thou will keep the United States in Thy holy protection —" She read with a curious reverence, especially noting the ending: "Grant our supplication, we beseech Thee, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

There seemed no question that George Washington had been a Christian. She vaguely recalled having seen reproductions of a famous battlefield painting, depicting him on his knees in prayer. It occurred to her that, throughout the centuries, presidents had turned to God in times of national crisis, and she found her resistance crumbling. If presidents and statesmen felt the need for prayer and could humble themselves to place their petitions before God, shouldn't she? Not tonight or tomorrow or another day — but now.

Settling into a pew, Amy ran her hand absently over the lustrous reddish-brown wood before closing her eyes. How did one begin? *Heavenly Father,* she tried out the words she had heard others use, not quite sure she had the right to address Him as *her* Heavenly Father. *If You are really there . . . if You can hear me . . . please make Yourself known to me. I've made such a mess of things. I need the peace that . . . that others talk about . . . that Catherine Marston has. I need to know that You care what happens to us, that You forgive us. I want to believe in You. And, oh, if You would only work out things between Mark and me —*

Amy knew that she was not making such a good job of the prayer, and that she might as well end it. What had Washington said? . . . *through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

"Remind me to check on how that's being handled with the agents I'm going to be interviewing," Mark ordered.

She nodded and jotted it down, tempted to slap him with a stinging, "Yes, *sir!*"

As they drove on, Amy pondered the beauty and living history surrounding them. Impressive as it was, how much more she would enjoy it if Mark were not retreating from her now.

Later, they parked at the stately memorial chapel and its nearby bell tower, where carillons pealed out the notes of "The Old Rugged Cross," the melody ringing across woods and fields. Letting himself out of the Corvette, Mark said rather abruptly, "I'll inspect the museum and you can take the chapel."

It seemed, more and more, that he was reverting to past behavior — shutting her out, avoiding contact with her. Or was he wrestling with a guilty conscience, sidestepping the possibility of a confrontation with God in the chapel? Mark had, after all, admitted that there was a time when he decided to be a minister like his grandfather, a time when he'd had a great deal of faith.

Amy grabbed her notebook and handbag and climbed out of the car without waiting for him, allowing the soothing music of the carillons to quiet her confusion.

She headed through the parking lot for the chapel, aware that the rift between them was widening by the minute. Why? Was Mark incapable of sharing a lasting love because of the resentment within him?

She forced her attention to the majestic gothic chapel and bell tower. Clear and pure, the final notes of the familiar hymn filled the air, and Amy recalled the words: *I will cling to the old rugged cross and exchange it someday for a crown.*

If she only had this kind of faith, perhaps the future would seem less frightening, and the present, less painful. She recalled that Catherine often played an old-time gospel record in which Robbie Hiner sang the hymn with overwhelming love and faith. How was it that some people found such peace in their relationship with God . . . and others — like herself — never quite grasped the meaning of faith?

Onward, she reminded herself, and entered the chapel, open notebook in hand. Duty called and, since she had agreed to do the report, she would complete the research.

Inside, the chapel was startlingly beautiful. The floor, constructed of squares of black and white marble, shone with the luster of years, its checkered pattern interrupted only by bronze commemorative plaques in the three aisles. Despite the quiet intimacy of the sanctuary, there was an atmosphere of reverent grandeur that drew the worshiper's gaze toward the towering ceiling, where rich wooden panels were embossed with emblems of the states. Colorful flags hung from high above the white chancel with its

to suggest, since the Grace Cathedral in San Francisco had proved a successful addition to the itinerary.

"Possibly," he replied shortly, "although I've never been there."

Returning to the Corvette, Mark held the door for her but made no further comment. After their lovely interlude in Princeton, his cold aloofness made little sense. Possibly there was far more to his taciturn manner than his wanting to cool their relationship to a simmer.

"Don't you feel well, Mark?" she inquired, genuinely concerned.

His tone held a trace of anger. "I feel fine."

Well, I don't! she felt like flinging at him. However, if he intended to give her the silent treatment, she could play that game too. She opened her notebook.

Few tourists were about and Amy was thankful for the excuse of taking notes as they followed the park map. Special stops featured cannons and log cabins, where costumed "Revolutionary soldiers" wearing white breeches, white colonial-type shirts, and red vests explained the reconstructed settings. Between stops, they drove at a leisurely pace through the battlefield. Amy had always enjoyed the study of history, and, despite her unhappiness, she experienced the illusion of riding through the 1700s.

Near George Washington's Headquarters, a friendly park ranger led them through the countryside with a small group of tourists, enthusiastically explaining everything from the history of the area to the stake-and-rider fence zigzagging around the handsome old stone house that had served as the president's quarters.

In the house, furnished much as it had been for Washington and his aides and officers, the ranger told of the Continental Army's epic struggle to survive against terrible odds — hunger, disease, and the unrelenting forces of nature. Hearing Washington's own words was especially moving: "To see men without clothes to cover their nakedness, without blankets to lie upon, without shoes . . . without a house or hut to cover them until those could be built, and submitting without a murmur, is a proof of patience and obedience which, in my opinion, can scarcely be paralleled."

"It does make history come alive, doesn't it?" Mark asked thoughtfully.

"Yes," Amy agreed with a shiver, "all too alive. I can just see those poor men in their tattered clothes, without blankets in the snow, far from home and family. . . ." Strange how insignificant one's own problems seemed when contrasted against far greater calamities, she thought.

Mark was looking at her oddly, and she wondered if he had forgotten their differences for a while too. Or was he only amazed at how quickly she had managed to rebound after the emotional battering he had given her?

Stepping outside, they wandered across the road to overlook Valley Creek and the rushing waters of the distant Schuylkill River. "Valley Forge seems a good half-day excursion for tourists visiting Philadelphia for several days," she said as they moved on.

"If you really want to know," he began, "I've been wondering if we've let things get out of control."

"Out of control? I don't quite understand." There had been nothing more than a few fervent kisses and embraces between them.

He frowned, staring straight ahead at the road. "I think we ought to simmer down."

She swallowed hard. "But I thought you were happy too. It was your idea to . . . to kiss me in the tower . . . and to tell me —"

"Yes, it was," he admitted. "And it's my fault for letting my feelings get the better of me. I apologize, though I'm not entirely sorry, either. It's just that I think we ought to back off, give ourselves time to see how we really feel."

She was so stricken that she hardly knew what to think or say. Finally the words came from beyond the lump filling her throat. "If you think so, Mark —"

He caught her hand. "I'm glad you're not furious. You have every right to be. But I just don't think we should rush into anything —"

Rush into anything! When she had spent most of her life loving him? Arguments and pleas leaped to mind, but it was useless. It would be impossible to force a commitment from him, nor would she want to.

Suddenly she knew precisely what was troubling him — the wedding! Val's and Thom's imminent wedding. Mark was frightened, whether he would admit it or not. He was surely not the first man to fear the prospect of marriage, particularly after having evaded it for so long. An old saying Gramp used to quote about bachelorhood came to mind: "A bachelor's life is a splendid breakfast, a tolerably fat lunch, and a most miserable dinner." But Mark evidently didn't see it that way.

The countryside disappeared in a blur. Trying to ignore the ache in her heart, she dug out her notebook. If she didn't occupy her mind now, she would surely give in to the tears that threatened. If only she hadn't agreed to this assignment, she would be on her way with the Marston family to Virginia. Now she would have to endure this trip stoically, for under no circumstances would she let Mark know how he had hurt her.

Later they drove into the green fields of Valley Forge National Historical Park and stopped at the Visitor's Center. The ultra-modern architecture of the underground building made a startling contrast to the Revolutionary era portrayed in its exhibits. That, she decided, was precisely how she must appear to Mark — cool and sleek and impervious to the pain hidden in her heart.

Inside, she gathered up brochures and took rapid notes from the placards describing the displays. "I suppose your foreign visitors ought to stop here first," she managed in a steady tone. "This is a good refresher course in American history."

"If they learned it at all," Mark added, his voice cool. "At the very least, they should stop here and at Washington's Headquarters."

"The Washington Memorial Chapel might be interesting too," she dared

wiping it off just now. I hope to be wearing more soon. Go on ahead. We'll be down."

"Whatever you say," Thom replied with an agreeable chuckle and continued down the tower steps. "Just don't hold us up too long."

"We don't promise to hurry!" Mark called after him with a laugh.

Amy shook her head ruefully, extracting a tissue from her handbag. "Fortunately, Thom exaggerates. It's even less than a trace of lipstick." She handed him the tissue.

"I hadn't planned to need that just yet," he whispered, taking her in his arms again. "I know a good thing when I find it."

"Me too," she whispered. "Me too."

The rest of the day passed, dreamlike, and Amy happily acquiesced to Mark's plea that she accompany him to Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. "Your San Francisco report was excellent," he said. "So much travel writing is terribly reportorial and dull, but you brought an emotional touch to it . . . a poetic touch too. You brought the city and its people alive for our readers."

How could she refuse with a compliment like that? How could she refuse when she never wanted to leave his side again? How could she refuse when she loved him with all of her heart?

The next morning dawned bright and clear. There was rejoicing when Thom graduated with honors under great sprawling trees among the ivy-covered halls of the university. Later there was a flurry of picture-taking — Thom, resplendent in his cap and gown, against a bower of purple blooming rhododendron; Thom and Valerie giving the victory sign; Thom and the rest of the family sharing the joy of his triumph.

With Mark at her side so attentive and loving, Amy thought she would burst with happiness. Val and Thom, caught up in each other and the festivities, made no comment, though Val occasionally darted concerned looks in their direction. Mark's parents wore a perpetual smile, embracing all of them.

That afternoon Amy and Mark set out for Valley Forge in his red Corvette, but the marvelous glow that had surrounded them had already begun to flicker. For one thing, Mark had never declared himself beyond that tentative *I think I love you,* and now his expression had turned contemplative as they drove down the turnpike. It struck her more and more forcefully that perhaps he was not at all sure he loved her, that he might have even changed his mind.

The smell of newly mown grass along the turnpike filled the warm air with an earthy reassurance, and she reached over to touch Mark's arm. "What are you thinking?" she ventured.

He shrugged uneasily. "Nothing much."

"Then why the thoughtful expression?"

She clung to him, eyes closed in relief, pressing her face into his shoulder, into his warm masculine scent. "I'm sorry," she apologized, trembling. "I nearly took you down the steps with me."

"Amy . . ." he murmured, holding her close.

It was more than mere passion in his voice that stopped her from pulling away, "Yes . . .?"

His voice filled with wonder. "I think I love you!"

Stunned by his words and the surrealistic setting, Amy felt herself spinning backward in time — back to her childhood, when her dearest wish had been to know Mark's love. Perhaps she was only conjuring up that childish wish again . . . simply daydreaming.

When she made no reply, he repeated huskily, "Did you hear me, Amy? I said I think I love you."

She whispered, "I heard you." Leaning away from him, she was amazed at the vulnerable expression on his face, an expression so unguarded and full of tenderness that she was weak. For a long moment they gazed into each other's eyes. "I don't know what to say," she finally responded, then, "Oh, Mark, I've waited so long to hear you say those words. I've — I've loved you all my life."

With a shudder of joy, he gathered her closer. His admission had changed everything between them. There was hope after all . . . hope that he was open to love, that he felt far more than physical attraction and simple friendship for her.

From up above Thom called out, "Hey, you two! You're missing a great view!"

Mark said for Amy's ears only, "The view from here isn't bad either." Then, dropping a kiss on her forehead, he called up the winding staircase, "We're on our way!"

She smiled tremulously before he kissed her again, his lips warm and tender. Reluctant to leave his embrace, she finally forced herself away and continued up the winding stone stairs, scarcely believing what had happened. The phrase echoed in her mind: *I think I love you.* How strange that Mark's uncertain declaration had not been sealed with a passionate kiss, but rather with wide-eyed vulnerability.

When they joined the others atop the tower at a bright sunshiny window overlooking the campus and golf course, Amy thought she had never seen any place so beautiful in her life. With Mark beside her, tentatively holding her hand in the presence of his family and Val, Amy suspected rather strongly that the beauty of the view was enhanced by her happiness.

Mark's parents tried to act as if nothing had changed; Val leveled a warning look at Amy; and, on the way down the tower steps, Thom turned back to Mark with a wide grin and pointed out sotto voce, "You're wearing a trace of lipstick, pal."

Mark squeezed Amy's hand. "Thanks, but there's not much sense in

Washington, D.C. seems far more enticing."

Dr. Marston put in a jovial, "No cracks about the old or the gray," and Catherine reached forward to pat his silvery head.

How congenial they were, Amy thought, pleased that her sister would have a real family at last.

Beside her, Mark inquired conversationally, "What do you think of the East Coast so far, Amy?"

He was simply trying to be pleasant for his family's benefit, she thought, and decided to respond in kind. Gazing past him at the quaint town with its English village flavor, she remarked, "If the rest of the East Coast is like this, I'm impressed."

Thom said, "Unfortunately, Princeton will spoil you. It doesn't get any better."

The only *unfortunate* note of the trip thus far, Amy grumbled to herself, was Mark's constant presence, his nearness still unnerving her. At the moment she felt such energy flowing between them that she was tempted to lean against his strong tan arm, to touch his smoothly shaven jaw, to trace the creases around his lips with her fingertips. She closed her eyes, recalling his kiss. Feeling his gaze upon her, she blinked and found him smiling at her, as if he had read her mind.

Quickly she pretended an intense interest in the campus. Thom was pointing out Carnegie Lake, then the university's neo-Gothic Graduate College and its impressive Grover Cleveland Tower. As Thom parked the station wagon he insisted, "Everyone has to climb the tower. The view from the top puts the surroundings into perspective." Amy began to wish she had worn hiking shoes instead of the flimsy sandals.

Thom parked near the stately stone buildings housing the resident students, and he and Valerie went off in search of the tower key. In the meantime Amy wandered about, struck with the grotesque gargoyles overlooking the Graduate College's arched entrance. When Thom and Valerie returned with the key, they led the way into the stone tower, his parents trailing behind them.

"Aren't you going up, Amy?" Mark asked, waiting at the door.

"Yes — of course." She hurried to join him and entered the cool interior of the gray stone tower. Climbing the narrow spiral staircase with Mark just behind her, she could hear the others, chatting and laughing, their voices echoing in the confined space. They had made quite a head start. Perhaps she should try to catch up with them, she thought, rushing up the worn stone steps.

"What's the great hurry?" Mark called.

He was the cause of her great hurry, Amy thought, pushing herself even harder. "I thought we might —" Suddenly her sandal slipped. "Oh . . .!" she cried out, her ankle turning and catapulting her into a fall toward the steps.

"Amy!" Mark grabbed her, staggered, then braced himself against the tower wall.

white sandals had seemed appropriate for their leisurely day, and she had twisted her long hair loosely and anchored it to the crown of her head. But if Mark assumed that she had dressed to impress him, he was mistaken!

As they drove off for Princeton, she resolved to keep her eyes on the scenery. The countryside, green and luxuriant from the wet spring, held the fragrance of the purple and white lilacs blooming along the roadsides. Catherine, who had lived in the East as a child, enthusiastically pointed out unfamiliar flowers and trees.

After a while Amy felt Mark's gaze and turned to him with annoyance, but his conciliatory expression was disarming. She dropped her eyes in self-reproach and, when she looked up at him again, she managed a faint smile before turning away. It was unfair to fault him alone for last night's kiss. Perhaps if she had more experience with men, she would know how to deal with what was obviously a mere physical attraction for him. It appeared that his relationships with women never progressed beyond the physical, since at thirty, he had yet to make the commitment of marriage. Perhaps he never would — with women like Glynia at his beck and call.

From the front seat Thom detailed the scenic highlights. As they passed by great dairy farms, he explained, "Some of these dairy farmers commute by helicopter to Wall Street daily —" He paused for effect. "That's where they earn their *real* cream."

"Oh, Thom!" the group groaned in unison.

He laughed. "I see I haven't lost my touch."

"Not yet," Mark added wryly. "Keep trying."

Here and there clusters of older houses lined the roadsides, then there were the ghosts of what had once been great estates with peacocks strutting the grounds. Almost all of them had been scaled down, even subdivided in some areas into luxurious developments at prices Amy found appalling, though Thom managed to find the humor in that aspect too.

Not for the first time, she marveled that two such dissimilar people as Thom and Valerie had fallen in love. For one thing Val was not known for her sense of humor, but so enjoyed Thom's that she made a wonderful audience for him. Nor was Val as intellectual as Thom, who appreciated her artistic flair and sensitive nature. In their case it was a matter of opposites attracting and complementing each other, Amy concluded. Love was not only a many-splendored thing, she mused, but an extremely illogical one as well.

When they arrived at Princeton, its small-town simplicity and tiny downtown park, featuring an unpretentious bronze statue of a boy reading a book, did not quite disguise the area's underlying wealth.

"Understatement is the key here among the country gentry," Thom explained.

"You'd fit in well someday," Mark injected, "with your doctorate in economics."

Thom winked at Val. "Maybe when we're old and gray. Right now,

8

"Good morning, Amy."

It was Mark, holding the door of the station wagon as she hurried from the hotel entrance. His voice was friendly, his slow smile reminiscent of last night's encounter.

She avoided meeting his eyes, and addressed the entire group with a cheerful, "Good morning, all!"

Their equally cheerful greetings lifted her spirits. Having missed breakfast to evade Mark, she had been wondering uneasily what the day might bring. Apparently it would be a light-hearted outing with the Marstons, even though she would have to sit beside Mark as they toured Princeton. But only for one more day. Thom's graduation would take place tomorrow morning, then Mark would depart for Philadelphia — alone!

Thom was driving, with Val nestled happily beside him in the front seat, Dr. Marston on Val's other side.

Amy climbed into the back seat beside Catherine.

"Isn't this a gorgeous day!" Catherine exclaimed. "Thom swears that we've brought California sunshine with us. Their weather has been wretched until now — rainy all spring."

"Yes, it's beautiful," Amy agreed politely.

A sudden beam of sunlight struck a gold cross suspended from a thin chain around Catherine's neck. The older woman had purchased the necklace years ago while on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land with a group from her church. Again Amy was reminded of Catherine's faith and frequent admonition to count one's blessings . . . a timely idea since the situation with Mark was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. At the moment Amy's chief blessings appeared to be the sunshine and the simple fact that she was not alone with Mark this morning. His family served as a welcome buffer.

Mark moved in beside her, their shoulders touching lightly, his long well-muscled legs crowded against the front seat. "You're looking lovely as usual," he commented.

His masculine aftershave assailed her senses, but she managed an even, "Thank you."

Her turquoise silk blouse with tiny cape sleeves, white linen skirt, and

Stepping out onto her floor, Amy took a quick look around and turned to Mark. "Thank you for your concern, but you can see there's no one lurking in the shadows, so please feel free to go on to your own room."

"That's easy. It's next to yours," he responded, pausing at her door while she dug out the key.

She unlocked the door, intent on escaping into her room, but before the door was fully open, Mark's arms were around her, turning her to him, one hand behind her neck, his fingers in her hair.

"Let's try again, Amy," he pleaded, his voice low and compelling. She struggled for only an instant before yielding to the sweet demanding pressure of his lips on hers.

When she finally broke away, she whispered breathlessly, "Kissing is all very lovely, but Mark, this won't work. It just won't work!" She rushed into her room and closed the door firmly against him.

Leaning against the door, her heart thundered as she heard him continue down the hallway before pausing to insert his key in the next lock. She must not get involved with Mark again. His kind did not believe in permanent commitments. And what could these passionate encounters do but continue to tear her emotions to shreds?

other diners were watching. Lifting her eyes after a respectable interval, she marveled to find that no one seemed to have noticed. Yet why did she find the Marstons' prayers so disturbing?

As she tried a forkful of the delicious chilled crabmeat, Mark murmured, "I really need you to do those reports for me. Won't you reconsider?"

"Thanks for the compliment," she replied icily, "but I'm not going."

He looked pointedly at the others. "And what are they all going to think — especially since they know my office has already made the arrangements."

Noting Val's happy expression as Thom whispered in her ear, Amy recalled the promise she had made to her sister. Pasting a smile on her face, she kept her voice light. "I really don't know what they'll think. I only know that I'm not going with you."

A muscle twitched near his chin. "Let's discuss it after dinner."

"Too late. I'm going to bed immediately after dinner."

He hesitated. "Then I'd like to see you to your room."

Across the table, Dr. Marston raised a quizzical eyebrow, and Amy nodded pleasantly. Still smiling, she whispered to Mark, "You most certainly will *not* see me to my room."

"At the very least, we might try to be civil this week for Valerie's and Thom's sake," he returned.

"All right," she conceded, "but *no* Philadelphia and *no* Washington, D.C. either."

After finishing her crab salad, she excused herself. "I'm terribly tired," she apologized as she rose.

The men stood and Catherine Marston smiled. "Of course, dear. Run along. We won't be far behind you."

"If you'll excuse me too," Mark said, "I'll see Amy safely to her room."

Dr. Marston nodded, his blue eyes twinkling.

Did he suspect what this son of his was up to? Amy wondered hopelessly as Mark followed her out of the dining room. Mark looked so like his father, but it seemed improbable that James Marston had ever been as devious as his son.

Once they had left the dining room, Amy's temper flared. "*That* was not terribly subtle."

"Under the circumstances, I thought I handled it very well," Mark replied lightly.

"Oh, you did?"

"The proper line," he corrected with a smile, "is *'Oh, you did — did you?!'* "

"Thank you ever so much," she returned, though not as icily as she had intended. "You're always so — helpful."

The elevator was crowded and people watched them curiously; it reminded her of their stay in San Francisco, which had been so blissful until that last evening and the trip home.

"Didn't you sleep well last night?"

She shot him an incredulous look. "Please turn on the radio." She wasn't about to discuss her lack of sleep over him again; she'd fallen into that trap before.

Once the industrial area of Newark was behind them, the last lingering rays of sunshine disappeared too, and there was little to see as they drove through the countryside. Amy rested her head against the seat and felt herself doze off for an instant, blink awake, then slowly doze again.

It seemed only a short time before they arrived at a colonial hotel on the outskirts of Princeton. She sat up drowsily. "I thought it would take longer —"

"You were sleeping," Mark explained as he pulled into the hotel's parking lot.

She considered refuting his statement, but it wasn't worth another argument. Moreover, he was apparently right.

"By the way," he added, "you snore."

"I do not!"

He laughed as he opened his car door and climbed out. "Very softly."

By the time Amy was settled in the room she was to share with Valerie, she was ready for bed.

"Won't it look awfully strange if you don't come down to dinner, Amy?" Valerie was clearly disturbed. "Please come down with us, even if you're not hungry."

Amy inhaled deeply. "Well, if it's really that important to you, Val, I will."

"You know, I'm not sure I believe there's 'nothing doing' between you and Mark. Sparks are flying all around you two. It might not be romance, but it certainly is *something*. Please, Amy, try not to fight with him — at least until after the wedding."

"I'll try," Amy promised reluctantly, hurrying to freshen up.

Downstairs in the dining room, she found herself paired with Mark at the table. The six of them — Val and Thom, Catherine and James, and she and Mark — fell naturally into couples. She decided she might as well accept the situation gracefully; the two of them would be thrown together most of this graduation and wedding week. In any event she would only eat a salad and then excuse herself. Tomorrow they were to make the rounds of the campus and the town of Princeton, then on Tuesday Thom would receive his doctorate. She would make it clear to Mark tonight that she was traveling on to Alexandria with his family as originally planned — and most definitely not accompanying him to Philadelphia, nor to Washington, D.C.

The meal was served promptly. To Amy's surprise, she heard Dr. Marston suggesting, "Shall we give silent thanks? This family has much for which to be thankful tonight." The warm glance that swept the table encompassed all of them, including Amy.

She bowed her head slightly and closed her eyes, concerned with whether

"You look beautiful," Amy assured her, noting that her sister's cheeks were pinker than usual. "Just wait — everything's going to be wonderful. Thom's probably feeling a little nervous too."

On the other side Amy caught Mark's look of undisguised amusement and turned away. What did *she* know about brides and grooms and wedding jitters? She supposed he was thinking.

Approaching the lounge, Mark peered out over the waiting crowd, his height giving him great advantage. "There's the anxious groom!"

"Where?" Val asked apprehensively.

Spotting Thom's mop of auburn hair, Amy waved. "There he is, Val, at the front of the lounge." Scrutinizing the deplaning passengers, Thom did indeed look as unnerved as Valerie, Amy thought.

Val and Thom saw each other at the same instant. Dropping her carry-on case, Valerie fairly flew the last few steps, throwing herself into Thom's open arms. "Oh — Thom!" she cried happily, "I thought this day would never come!"

Amy's eyes misted over as she collected her sister's things and tried to avoid overhearing their happy reunion.

"No crying," Mark chided her as he helped gather up Val's belongings. "You're only allowed to cry at the wedding."

"I'm not crying," she insisted with a sniff.

Thom turned to Amy with his familiar lopsided grin. "Who's not crying?" he asked, dropping a brotherly kiss on her cheek. He was still holding a radiant Valerie, who looked as if she had never harbored a moment's doubt about the wedding.

Amy laughed through a new threat of tears. "Me . . . I'm not crying! Oh, Thom, you'd better be good to my sister!"

"I will, Amy. I promise." His brown eyes shone with sincerity, and he moved to embrace his parents.

When all of the luggage and cartons were collected, Thom led them and a uniformed skycap to the parking lot. He had leased a station wagon to carry everything, and Mark had arranged for a sports car for his drive to Philadelphia and Washington.

"I'll drive Amy so you four can thrash out the last-minute arrangements," Mark offered. "That is, if the newlyweds-to-be can stop gazing at each other long enough to think."

"Wait a . . ." Amy tried to object, but it was too obvious that Mark's plan made perfect sense.

Within minutes the cars were loaded, and they drove off for Princeton, Mark's red Corvette trailing the station wagon.

At length he turned to her. "Tired?"

She nodded. Here in New Jersey evening was upon them and, despite the three-hour time difference, nightfall was welcome. "Yes. I'm exhausted, and if you don't mind, I'd like to skip dinner. I just want to go to bed."

Mark sipped from his cup of coffee, lifting his gaze to study her. "I suppose I owe you an apology for last night."

"Yes, you do. And you owe Rob one too." But it was more than Mark's standing there at the door like a watchdog that bothered her. She had desperately wanted to end the entanglement between herself and Rob, and Mark's tasteless performance had only served to prolong the matter. There had been little sleep for her last night.

He hesitated, strangely uncertain. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry that it happened too. Just as sorry as losing my temper about Tony and his — his girlfriend in San Francisco, and my making that remark about Erika. We're both sorry. Now let's just let everything go at that."

"And if I don't particularly want to let things go at that?"

"I don't care to play games anymore!" Amy's voice rose. "I'm not Glynia or one of the other women in your life!"

From the seat in front of her, Val's head swiveled. Hoping her sister hadn't overheard her heated exchange, Amy turned blindly to the window, but there was nothing to see except thick white clouds.

"Amy —," Mark whispered, taking her hand from the armrest.

She tugged herself loose. "Please leave me alone!" What a way to begin Valerie's wedding week — a quarrel between the maid of honor and the best man. Amy buried her head in her book.

Hours later, when she put down her paperback for lunch, Mark attempted to resume conversation. "About the research job in Philadelphia and —"

"I told you. I'm afraid you'll have to find someone else," she stated firmly.

"Let's try again," he began. "It will be strictly a business proposition. I'll even throw in a twenty percent raise to cover your — grievances."

"One hundred percent wouldn't be enough!" she returned, amazed that he would be willing to buy his way back into her good graces. "As for your suggestion that we have a *businesslike* relationship, I'm willing to substitute the word *pleasant,* but I'm not working for you again."

His eyes took her measure. "Then pleasant it is."

She turned to her lunch — a delectable spinach quiche, croissant, and salad — and was able to eat much of it.

Mark kept his word. He was a perfect traveling companion for the remainder of the flight to Newark, the most convenient airport to Princeton.

Deplaning behind Valerie, Amy again sensed her sister's nervousness. Fortunately Thom was not as mercurial as his older brother, nor was he as handsome, she thought with a wrench of her heart. Thank goodness Val had settled for the steadier of the two brothers! Of course, Thom had never faced the tragedy of a girl committing suicide over him. It was bound to have an effect. She wondered whether Mark often thought about it.

As they hurried through the disembarking area, Valerie clutched Amy's arm. "Do I look all right?"

said to Catherine. "She's the one who's always composed."

"I don't know about that," Val replied ruefully.

Mark turned to Amy. "You strike me as composed."

"I do?" Between Val's last-minute nerves and the episode at the door last night, she felt anything *but*.

"Yes, particularly as a researcher," Mark continued.

"Oh, that's different. That's dealing with words on paper," she began, then nearly lost all semblance of composure as Mark casually slid an arm around the back of her seat. What was he up to? Perhaps he had been jealous of Rob after all . . . but would he ever forget her terrible crack on the way home from San Francisco?

"Mark tells me you did an outstanding job on the San Francisco report," Dr. Marston injected.

Valerie spoke up proudly, "Amy has always been an excellent writer."

"Yes," Mark agreed, "excellent."

Amy turned a chilly look on him. After last night's embarrassing performance, she didn't know what to think anymore. Only one thing was certain: she would do no more research for Mark Marston. He would simply have to find someone else.

Sunday morning traffic was still light in Santa Rosita; even the freeways were surprisingly uncrowded as they approached the Los Angeles airport. Amy felt a flutter of excitement as Dr. Marston parked the van. Within minutes, they were sitting on an airport bus, then unloading beside the terminal.

When they finally boarded the plane, she found herself seated at a window, an empty seat between herself and Mark; his parents and Valerie occupied the seats just ahead of them. How had that happened?

Shrugging, she extracted a paperback novel from her carry-on bag and tried to read, but felt Mark's eyes on her. Finally he pulled the airline magazine from the seat pocket in front of him and opened it, thumbing through it distractedly.

As the plane taxied to the runway, Amy felt a great lump growing in her throat and clutched the armrests.

"Scared?" Mark asked with a twinkle in his blue eyes.

"Of course not!" she retorted, though it was only her second time to travel by plane. Years ago, Gramp had flown with her and Val to Northern California to visit old friends.

Amy turned to watch their take-off, the plane ascending rapidly as they flew well out over the ocean before banking east. Beneath them, the placid Pacific gave way to the sprawl of Los Angeles with its miles of freeways teeming with toy cars. From this vantage point even the canyons looked like small indentations in the crust of the earth, and the foothills like ripples in a tan ocean.

Shortly after the fasten-seat-belt light blinked off, the flight attendant served a midmorning snack of orange juice and nuts.

airport tomorrow morning by eight o'clock. It's going to be a busy week."

Amy bristled, certain that Mark had stationed himself near the door to interrupt their good-night kiss. "It's only ten o'clock, Mark," she reasoned, appalled at his nerve.

"Oh?" He glanced at his watch innocently. "It seemed much later."

Rob looked dubious. Finally he drew himself up and nodded politely. "See you next weekend in Alexandria, Amy."

"Yes. See you then." She stepped into the house, darting an indignant look at Mark. When the door was closed behind them, she turned on him, outraged. "Really, Mark! That was unforgivable. I can't believe you would —"

The blue of his eyes darkened with passion, and suddenly his arms were around her, crushing her against him, his lips putting an end to her tirade.

"Mark!" she protested at last, twisting away so violently that it took him by surprise. He backed off for an instant, and she seized the moment to sidestep his embrace. "You have no right!" she flung over her shoulder, rushing from the hallway and up the stairs.

What on earth had gotten into him? With any other man she might attribute such actions to jealousy, but certainly not with Mark who could have any woman he wanted. Whatever the case, she must make it perfectly clear that he had no claim on her. She refused to fall victim to any more agony over him! And . . . in the unlikely event that he thought meeting her at the door was some kind of joke . . . she was definitely not amused.

The next morning Amy tried valiantly to keep her distance from Mark. But as they climbed into the catering van — the one vehicle commodious enough to hold all of the luggage and the cartons of wedding gifts — she found herself sitting in the back seat between Valerie and Mark. The only diversion was Valerie's nervousness over what she might have forgotten.

"Don't tell me you're finally getting wedding jitters," Catherine commented laughingly from the front seat. "I thought for a while you might be the world's only exception to prenuptial nerves."

"I suppose that's all it is," Valerie replied uneasily, "though it's strange to be leaving Santa Rosita too. I wonder when I'll be back here again."

"In no time at all," Catherine assured her. "We're hoping the two of you will come home for Christmas."

Amy thought of Val's confession in their room this morning. "I'm suddenly terrified, Amy. What if after all this time apart Thom has changed his mind and doesn't want to marry me? Or what if our marriage turns out to be a terrible mistake?"

Amy had tried to reassure her sister, knowing how many years Valerie had loved Thom. She marveled that Val would question her decision at the last moment. It seemed impossible.

Now Amy patted her sister's hand. "Valerie never gets the jitters," she

pristine white bathtub. Dark wooden cabinets had already been hung in the minuscule kitchen.

"What parklike view was Mrs. Smithers referring to?" Rob inquired.

Amy looked out the sliding door and beyond the small enclosed balcony. "It appears that Mrs. Smithers means the street meridian's ivy and trees."

Rob chuckled, then looked around the apartment again. "And on the same positive note — it appears you won't have much cleaning to do."

"True." After living in the Marston home, the apartment seemed little larger than their kitchen and the adjoining family room. "But it's all right," she announced with determination. "By the time I'm through with it, it's going to be a real home."

"Sure it will," Rob consoled.

Later they stopped at a Mexican restaurant for a tostada dinner, then on to a movie, a spy thriller. Amy had read the book and was chagrined to see that the story had been changed to enhance the risqué element. It was embarrassing to sit with Rob through the smoldering love scenes. As far as she was concerned, the story line had been ruined.

On the way home Rob sensed her displeasure and apologized. "I guess we should have seen the science fiction movie." Adroitly changing the subject, he chatted about his work.

Amy appreciated his thoughtfulness and was content to listen, prompting him to continue with an occasional question. Gramp would have approved of Rob. She could hear him now . . . "A fine young man, Granddaughter." And indeed he was — caring, hard-working, and with more than his share of intelligence, albeit in the area of science, which unfortunately did not interest her.

As they pulled up at the Marston house, the outdoor lights were ablaze.

"They certainly lit it up tonight," Rob remarked, turning off the car's engine.

Amy shifted nervously in her seat, recalling their passionate kiss on the beach. No doubt Rob would expect another. Unconsciously she reached for the door handle. The door opened easily.

Startled, Rob climbed out and hurried around to help her out. He caught her hand in his as they strolled up the sidewalk to the front door.

Amy turned to him with a smile. "Thank you for a lovely time, Rob. I guess I'll see you in Virginia next weekend."

Under the bright light, Rob's brown eyes glowed with warmth. His hands cupped her shoulders and drew her to him.

The door cracked open loudly, and Mark stood there, towering over them. "I wondered who it was," he said, gazing at them curiously. "We have a house full of wedding presents. Can't be too careful nowadays."

Self-consciously, Rob dropped his hands. "I suppose so." The disappointment in his voice was evident.

"It's late," Mark added in a paternal tone. "We have to leave for the

"But we're leaving tomorrow morning for the wedding —"

"So am I," he put in quickly. "We won't make it a late night. You'll have plenty of time to pack today."

"Yes, I suppose so," she agreed, noticing that Glynia had perched on the barstool beside Mark and was pouring herself a cup of coffee. It would be a good idea to get out of the house tonight. "Thank you, Rob. I'd love to go."

After replacing the receiver, Amy excused herself. "I've some things to do before the trip," she explained. "Just leave my breakfast, please. I'll finish it later."

"Sure," Mark replied with a speculative glance.

Glynia, on the other hand, flashed a calculating smile.

That evening, as Amy and Rob drove out of the Marston driveway, she felt a sense of relief in escaping Mark's presence. He — and Glynia — had spent most of the day on the patio just outside the laundry room window. It had been decidedly uncomfortable to be washing and ironing clothes with the two of them forever in sight — particularly Glynia in her white bikini.

"Val mentioned that you're going to do some more research for Mark in Philadelphia and Washington," said Rob, turning onto the highway.

"Oh? Well, I don't know. It's not definite. . . ." She paused, wondering how on earth her sister had heard about it.

Rob slid a curious look at her, then turned again to his driving. "How was the trip to San Francisco?"

"Fine. Just fine." She wasn't up to rehashing that episode in her life. "Could we possibly stop by my apartment? I'd like to see if they're making any progress. It's supposed to be ready in just over a week."

"Sure thing," Rob replied. "I wanted to get an early start so we wouldn't be rushed, so we could stop now if you like."

"Wonderful." Only last week the thought of moving into the empty apartment had filled her with such loneliness. Now she considered it more a haven — a retreat from Mark and the turmoil he had caused her.

As they pulled up outside the Spanish-style apartment building, a crew of landscapers were planting bougainvillaea against the white stucco. They had already put in hibiscus and bottlebrush bushes on the small incline sloping down to the sidewalk and red geraniums as a ground cover. Rob helped her out of the car, turning an annoying look on the workers who eyed her with appreciation.

Inside, the pungent odor of fresh paint assailed them. The manager, an attractive fiftyish Mrs. Smithers, was busily moving in. "Go on upstairs, honey," she urged. "The painters are finishing your place today. It's been a real challenge getting everything coordinated, but it's going to be worth it. Just wait till you see the nice parklike view from your living room window."

Upstairs, the painters were finishing the white walls of Amy's studio apartment, while in the bathroom, two plumbers were installing an equally

"Aren't you going shopping with Valerie?"

"In a minute. I had some last-minute packing to do. Val rode with James on his way to the hospital. But you're right — I'd better get going. Have a good day, dear."

Amy had just settled down to breakfast when she heard footsteps coming down the hallway to the kitchen. A tremor ran through her, covering her with goose bumps. Mark? Taking a bite of the melon, she stiffened her shoulders.

When he spoke, his voice held a hard edge. "Mind if I join you?"

"Of course not," she replied, compelled to look at him. His expression was dour. She'd try once more. "Mark . . . please forgive me —"

"Let's forget it," he responded abruptly and poured himself a cup of coffee.

But would *he* be able to forget? Amy wondered. Her crack about Erika had been horrendous . . . as difficult to forget as the love that had flared with such passion between them. Well, it was over, and there would be no better time than now to tell him of her decision about the next assignment.

"Mark," she began unsteadily as he sat down on the stool at the opposite end of the counter. "I've decided that I . . . can't possibly go with you to Philadelphia and Washington, D.C."

He frowned. "My office has already made all the arrangements. You agreed to do it, and I expected you to honor your commitment."

Cradling her cup carefully, she sipped her hot coffee. "I'm certain you can find someone else."

He swiveled on the barstool to face her, and his stern gaze softened. "And if I don't care to?"

Just at that moment a knock sounded at the French doors, and Glynia strolled in. She wore a minuscule white bikini, her untamed black hair curling around her all-too-perfect face. "Well, isn't this an intimate little scene?" she said, then laughed lightly at Mark. "It seems to take care of your aversion to eating breakfast alone."

Amy almost dropped her coffee cup and the dark liquid sloshed onto the counter. Mark had made such a big thing about hating to dine alone, but apparently she was not the first woman to have heard that story. What other old lines had he fed her?

The phone rang and Amy reached across the counter for it, trying to ignore the kiss that Glynia was dropping on Mark's cheek.

"Marston residence," she managed.

"Amy? It's Rob. . . ." He hesitated, then asked, "Are you there?"

"Yes, of course I'm here."

"Oh. You sound odd. I guess you're not alone."

"No, I'm not."

"I'll be brief. I was hoping to take you out to dinner and maybe to a movie tonight."

debacle, but then she had skipped dinner, too tired to fix something for herself . . . or to risk spending another moment alone with Mark.

Taking a stoneware plate, Amy helped herself to strawberries, a melon slice, and a bran muffin. She was about to settle on a barstool next to the kitchen work counter when her eyes were drawn to a picture hanging on the wall near the French doors. A beam of sunshine sparkled on the glass protecting the framed picture . . . no, it was a sampler, recently hung, for she hadn't noticed it before. The embroidered words were simple cross-stitching:

Earth's crammed with Heaven
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,
The rest sit around and pluck blackberries.
Elizabeth Barret Browning

The first two lines make sense, she thought. *Earth reflects the beauty of Heaven in nature — flowers, trees, shrubs.* She smiled, remembering the unforgettable sights she had seen in San Francisco only this week — the bay awash with the colors of the setting sun, the melding of blues as sapphire sea met azure sky — and, close to home, the flaming bougainvillaea.

The third line, however, struck her as perplexing — unforgivable for an aspiring poet. She mulled it over: "But only he who sees takes off his shoes . . ." He who sees what? The beauty in a bush? As for "taking off his shoes," she searched her memory. . . . Wasn't there an account in the Bible of a prophet who took off his shoes during a supernatural phenomenon? A burning bush? That was it! The prophet was Moses, and it was God in the bush that burned but was not consumed. In reverence for the holy ground on which he stood, Moses had taken off his shoes!

"Lovely, isn't it?" Catherine asked as she entered the kitchen through the French doors.

"Very!" She examined the yellowing linen and embroidered green leaves and blackberries encircling the verse. "It looks old."

"I found it in the attic several months ago and had it framed. Sarah, my mother-in-law, embroidered it years ago."

"The minister's wife?" Amy asked.

"Yes. James remembers her working on it when he was a boy. It seems a wonderful thing to keep in the family. I'm only sorry we didn't find it sooner, but maybe . . . just maybe there's a reason for that too."

Amy turned from the sampler and pondered the meaning of the poet's words. It occurred to her that if she could "see" God as her parents had and the Marstons did, she might not feel so empty; perhaps she wouldn't have allowed herself to be taken in by Mark just because she yearned so desperately for love. Embarrassed to find Catherine watching her, Amy asked,

you're referring to a great romance between Mark and me, your worries are over." It was pointless to mention that, for a time at least, she had been tempted. "There's nothing doing."

"Oh?" Valerie asked, not sounding entirely convinced. She hesitated, then added, "I once had a terrible crush on Mark, and I've always assumed that any female who comes within ten feet of him is instantly attracted. I was afraid you'd be one of them. And Mark is so different from the rest of his family. He's changed so dreadfully — since Erika."

"There's nothing doing," Amy insisted. After yesterday that much was certainly true, but she wished her sister had not brought up the dead girl's name again. Moreover, she didn't want to hear any more of Val's sage pronouncements.

"Well, if you say so. I just wish you didn't sound quite so vehement about it. It makes me all the more suspicious."

"It's just that I don't enjoy being grilled, Val."

Valerie allowed a soft sigh to escape her. "I'm sorry. I guess I still feel somehow responsible for my little sister."

Amy replied with a forgiving smile, "Don't I know it!"

"I suppose my sense of responsibility must strike you as overbearing at times."

"Sometimes," Amy admitted as she started for the shower, "but I love you anyhow."

"Thanks — I love you too." Valerie gave her a warm hug and hurried out of the room.

Later, under the stinging spray of the shower, Amy was determined not to dwell on the mess she had made of things with Mark. She fervently hoped to stay out of his way today, although there would be no chance of avoiding him during the wedding festivities. When an opportunity presented itself, however, she would certainly tell him she had decided not to make the trip to Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. with him. It seemed a shame, though. She had always wanted to visit Philadelphia. Well, it wouldn't be a total loss. She would see a little of Washington, since the wedding party would be staying in the nearby suburb of Alexandria, Virginia.

When she returned to the bedroom to slip into her blue sundress, she discovered that Valerie had made the bed for her. As always, it was difficult to remain annoyed with her sister for long; theirs had never really been a bumpy relationship. On the other hand, her relationship with Mark was a different matter altogether; bumpy was hardly the word for it, swinging as it did from the heights of ecstasy to the depths of anguish.

On the way downstairs the aroma of fresh-perked coffee greeted her. Hopefully Mark would not be around. She peered into the kitchen. It was empty. At the counter, breakfast was laid out: a cold tray with strawberries, sliced melons, and fresh pineapple; a basket with oversized blueberry and bran muffins; boxes of cereals. Amazing how hungry she was after yesterday's

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"Amy?" Valerie whispered.

Amy rolled over in bed, blinking awake. *Where am I?* she thought, struggling to orient herself. Dark wooden beams supported the ceiling of the spacious white bedroom; arches curved over oaken doors. At the open French window, birds twittered from a California pepper tree in the courtyard, and the surf was rolling onto the beach not too far away.

Peering around, she saw her sister sitting on the other twin bed. The bed was already made, its green and white leafy spread trailed down to the moss green carpeting. Of course — they were back at the Marstons' house. She and Mark had returned last night after having quarreled over that couple. She sat up slowly.

"I thought I was still in San Francisco. What time is it?"

"Ten o'clock," Valerie replied, looking crisp in white culottes and a yellow knit top that enhanced her honey-blondness.

Amy yawned and stretched. "Guess I overslept."

"I wasn't sure whether I should wake you, but everyone else has been up for hours, though I'm not sure about Mark."

"I didn't realize I was that exhausted," Amy said, trying to ignore any thought of him. "I hope they haven't waited breakfast for me."

"No, everyone's on their own for breakfast today. Catherine and I are going shopping and thought you might like to come along. We're flying back East tomorrow — remember? There's still so much to do before the wedding and not much time left."

"Oh, Val, thanks — but I have to wash some clothes and pack for the trip." She desperately needed a quiet day, she thought as she stood and smoothed her blue cotton batiste nightgown. "I can't quite believe it — tomorrow we'll be back East."

"I can't believe it myself — tomorrow I see Thom!" Valerie was radiant at the thought, then her attention shifted again to Amy. "How did it go in San Francisco?"

"The research went very well. San Francisco is wonderfully interesting. I took tours all through —"

"That's not what I meant and you know it!" Val interrupted with a laugh.

Amy started for her closet, dodging her sister's penetrating gaze. "If

else, she knew she had done a good job with the assignment, though it was small consolation to her now.

Darkness had fallen, and, as they drove into the Marston driveway, she was relieved to see that the house was dark too; the family had probably gone out for dinner. At least she would not have to explain the obvious rift between herself and Mark, although *rupture* was the more appropriate word.

She would deal with explanations tomorrow. Tonight all she wanted to do was to throw herself into bed and sleep for a week, forgetting the last few hours. But would Mark ever forget — or forgive her?

Terrified, Amy tensed against the seat as the huge rig loomed before them. Acting instinctively, Mark swung the car around the laboring truck. Fortunately there was no oncoming traffic, and she released her breath in a long sigh.

Mark shifted down, muttering, "I should have flown."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I was fool enough to bring . . ." His vehement words trailed off significantly.

". . . to bring me along?"

"If you want to put it that way — yes," he retorted, finally maneuvering the car off the road and bringing it to a stop.

"You can put it any way you want to!" She was shaking with anger and fright. "But don't worry, I won't commit suicide over you like Erika did!" The words were no sooner uttered than she saw Mark's face pale, and the realization of her hasty comment dawned with sickening finality. "Oh, Mark . . . I'm so sorry!"

"Well, it's out now!" he flared, turning off the engine and pulling himself out of the car. "I suppose you've been thinking about that all along!"

Stung by the rage in his voice, she blanched. If she had tried for a lifetime, she could not have touched on a more sensitive subject. "I'm truly sorry."

Without a backward look, he slammed the door and stalked down the road.

"Mark!" she called after him, but now he had broken into a jog, probably heading for the nearest service station. She climbed out of the car. "Mark!" She watched him run on as if he didn't hear . . . or care. And now it was beginning to rain. *Oh, Amy,* she reproached herself, *how could you have said those things?* It was true that you always hurt the one . . . you love. A sob caught in her throat, then another and another until she gave way to a torrent of hot tears.

Five hours later, after having waited for parts to be delivered to the small service station and then for the repair work to be done, they were underway again. When Amy glanced in the mirror on the car's visor, her eyes were still red. Maybe he would listen to her now.

"It wasn't your fault about Erika . . . everyone knows that she'd been seeing a psychiatrist for years . . . and that you had never been more than a friendly boss to her. It's — it's just that she was so unstable and had a crush . . . an irrational fixation on you —"

"Drop it, Amy." Mark's voice was flat and even.

"But I *am* sorry," she persisted miserably. She would never be able to repair the damage inflicted by her tongue this time. She closed her eyes in despair.

Shaking off her despondent mood, Amy picked up her writing tablet and, by the time they arrived in Santa Rosita, the report was completed. If nothing

particular alleyways of life? Well, she would not be a part of it.

"What do you think, Amy?" Mark asked, as if nothing were amiss.

"I'm a little tired," she managed to reply evenly. "I think I'd prefer to return to the hotel. I have to pack too." She supposed she must seem an awful dullard to them — Mark included. Suddenly she couldn't resist a gibe, "But please feel free to go along with your *friends.*" At the furious look in Mark's eyes, she realized she had pushed him too far.

"Fine!" he replied. "We'll drop you off at the hotel, then I think I'll just do that. Sounds like great fun."

Heartsick, she turned away and followed Sondra and Tony through the dining room. What a fool she was to have made such a big thing over their relationship. On the other hand, Mark had made it obvious that he preferred their company to hers. Apparently Valerie and Rob had been right all along about Mark Marston. His family background might be impeccable — but he marched to a different beat.

The next morning, as they began the long drive home, Amy was still despairing over their clash of the evening before. How could Mark have been so insensitive? Conversely, she herself was not blameless. She had mishandled everything again.

Darting a glance at Mark in the driver's seat, she winced to see the angry thrust of his jaw. They had breakfasted separately this morning, then he had checked them out while she sat in the suite stewing over her stupidity. If anything, he had seemed even more irate than she.

Once the bustling city was behind them, the scenery passed in a blur: San Francisco Bay, Candlestick Park, the Cow Palace Convention Center, then foothills rising to meet an overcast sky. On the car radio an announcer was forecasting rain. What else? It suited their black moods perfectly.

"I guess I'll work on the report," Amy said, opening the manila envelope on her lap.

There was no answer from the driver's side.

Well, if he wasn't speaking, she would have time to write, she thought, and forced her attention to the task at hand. After struggling with the introduction, the report began to take shape, the words falling neatly into place.

Nearing Paso Robles, Amy looked up momentarily to gaze out at the live California oaks dotting the green hillsides where placid sheep grazed. In contrast to the high-voltage electricity flashing between the occupants of the car, she found the scene peaceful and serene. *If only things had worked out differently,* she said to herself . . .

Her thoughts were jolted by the sight of a huge semi-trailer truck immediately ahead. It had slowed to start a long incline, and instantly Mark hit the brakes to avoid a collision.

"No brakes!" he yelled, pumping furiously.

Amy's indignation rose. How dare the woman make such a sordid insinuation. "I'm conducting research for Mark's firm," she corrected firmly.

"Sounds like as good an excuse as any," Sondra said with a meaningful glance at Tony, who cheerfully raised his glass and announced, "I'll drink to that!"

If only Mark would *say* something, Amy thought, her resentment mounting by the moment. Suddenly she rose, excusing herself from the table. She had to get away from the disgusting couple, if only for a few minutes.

She swept through the dining room, not stopping until she reached the hallway. To her surprise, she found that Mark had followed her.

"Listen, I don't like the situation any better than you do," he said, his eyes darkening ominously, "but you don't have to act so — superior!"

"Superior!" she flung back. "If you were any kind of a gentleman, you wouldn't have involved me in such a situation!" Turning on her heel, she ran blindly to the ladies' lounge.

Inside, Amy was too furious for tears and sat in stiff dismay on a couch. Why had Mark let this happen? It wasn't as if she didn't know that some married men picked up women when they were out of town, but why was Tony flaunting his affair so flagrantly? Amy knew she was far from perfect, but she did know the difference between right and wrong, and her standards of morality were high. Now she and Mark had been placed in a compromising position, and Sondra was trying to tar them with the same brush!

She'd simply stay in the lounge until Mark returned to the table, then take a cab alone to their hotel. But a thought occurred to her, and she opened her white evening bag. Of course — it had been too small to hold her wallet. She had no money with her for a cab!

Amy made a swift appraisal of her appearance in the mirror. Aside from her apparent chagrin, she looked the same. Yet circumstances had changed so radically. Somehow she would have to endure the remainder of the evening. Gathering up her courage, she took a moment to brush her hair back behind her ears and gloss her lips.

She started for the dining room again. As she approached the table, there was a glimmer of relief in Mark's eyes as he rose to seat her. Did he suspect that she might have fled?

Fortunately the two men resumed the business discussion that had prompted their dining together in the first place. After unsuccessfully attempting to divert Tony from the topic, Sondra occupied her time with picking at her food, smoking, and staring out the window.

By the time the unpleasant meal was over, Sondra and Tony had downed a bottle of wine with their dinners in addition to the cocktails, and were eager to hit the nightclubs.

"Come on along, Amy," Tony urged. "A good time won't hurt you!"

Amy suspected her idea of a good time and Tony's were vastly different. Why was it that so many people seemed so anxious to drag others down their

trying not to gape. "How do you do?" Her tone was clipped and formal. *Don't jump to conclusions, Amy,* she admonished herself. *Appearances can be deceiving.*

"Pleased to meet you," Sondra replied, assessing Amy with a lift of one arched brow.

Mark appeared genuinely astonished. It seemed immediately apparent that Tony was either separated from his wife — or cheating on her. He was at least fifty years old; Sondra, no more than nineteen. They made a ludicrous picture, Amy thought, holding hands like teenagers, the diamond ring on Tony's plump finger sparkling.

Mark broke the uncomfortable silence. "And where are you from, Sondra?"

Her brown eyes danced, and she turned a provocative smile on Mark. "Oh, I live here in the city." Her voice took on a sultry note. "How about you, Mark?"

"Now — wait just one minute, Sondra," Tony warned. "I know Mark's a big handsome fella, but you're with me. Don't forget I'm the guy who's picking up your tab this week."

Sondra sent him a petulant look. "Big spender — paying for our hotel room and food."

"And that get-up you're wearing, as I recall!" Tony shot back. "Right down to those straps you call shoes!"

Amy swallowed hard and turned to Mark, who seemed to be recovering as graciously as possible under the circumstances. She was thankful when the waiter arrived with their menus, although by now she had lost her appetite. If only she and Mark could have dinner alone. . . . She forced herself to concentrate on the menu, deciding upon a crab salad.

"Is that all you're having?" Mark asked.

"I'm not very hungry." She appealed wordlessly to him, but there was nothing that could be done. Mark had mentioned Tony's importance to his New York travel operation. They would obviously continue the evening with the other couple, Amy concluded; she would simply have to make the best of it.

"Tony's taking me to Carmel this weekend," Sondra remarked to Amy. She squeezed his hand again. "Aren't we having a good time, hon?"

"That we are!" Tony agreed, then turned to Mark with a conspiratorial wink. "I'm counting on you to keep this under your hat."

Mark nodded uneasily, quickly glancing out the window again.

"You from around here too?" Sondra asked Amy, after taking a look at her ringless left hand.

"No, I'm from Santa Rosita . . . south of Los Angeles."

"Oh, you two must be together too," Sondra said with a relieved laugh. "I thought you might be married."

When at last they strolled out onto the grounds, however, he said nothing more about their visit to the cathedral, but surprised her with another mention of his trip to the East Coast.

"I hope you'll decide to do the research for me in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. before the wedding. I can't imagine finding anyone else who would do it so conscientiously."

Mark wanted her with him, she thought happily, but he just wasn't quite ready to commit himself fully enough to say so.

"Will you do it?" he persisted.

What a fool she would be to pass up such an opportunity. She gazed deeply into his blue eyes. "Yes, Mark — I will."

Something leaped within her at the hope that these simple words of acceptance pledged in front of the cathedral were only the first of other vows yet to come.

The Thursday tour of the Napa and Sonoma valleys lasted nine hours, and Amy returned to the hotel exhausted and just in time for a fast shower before dinner. Somehow she had managed to visit most of San Francisco and surrounding places of interest since Sunday night. There were, of course, more tours such as the eleven-hour visit to Monterey and Carmel, but it was humanly impossible to go that far afield on this trip, nor did Mark expect it. Indeed he seemed extremely pleased with her research and organization of the report thus far. He had already called his office to set up the arrangements for her to accompany him to Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.

Hurrying into the hotel lobby, Amy glanced at her watch. It was nearly six-thirty. Their dinner with Tony Sanca and his wife was scheduled for seven. "Tony's a little brash," Mark had warned, "but he's a good businessman. I think you'll especially enjoy his wife. They're an older couple, but Ruby's truly a gem."

"You did it again, Mark. Bad pun. Ruby — a gem," she had chided him.

They arrived just a few minutes late at the hotel's rooftop dining room, overlooking San Francisco and the bay. Amy wore her white silk dress, the same dress she had worn on that first memorable evening with Mark. She followed the maître d' through the maze of tables, with the promise of another such evening before her. If Ruby were at all like Mark's other friends, it was sure to be delightful.

"There you are, Mark!" his friend Tony said, rising from the table, drink in hand.

And that must be Ruby . . . although something about the young brown-eyed blonde with Tony rang false, Amy thought as she was seated. Hadn't Mark mentioned that Ruby was older?

Tony's voice was thick with a New York accent, his words slurred. "I'd like you to meet my friend, Sondra."

Amy nodded toward the voluptuous blonde in her deep-cut black dress,

"I happen to think you're very nice," she responded softly before they moved down the aisle, still holding hands.

The majestic music became less overwhelming and quite natural to the cathedral, although it prolonged her interest in that small boy who spent occasional afternoons in his grandfather's church. "You must have learned quite a lot about Christianity as a child."

Mark glanced up toward the stained-glass windows. "Yes, I suppose I did. There was even a time — I must have been six or seven — when I decided that I would be a minister like my grandfather, a time when I thought I had a great deal of faith." His chin quivered with sudden emotion, but he quickly subdued it.

"Oh? Following in your grandfather's footsteps?" she mused, then, aware of the growing stiffness of his lips, immediately regretted her question.

His reply was abrupt. "Yes, I suppose that was it."

She suddenly perceived at least a part of what was bothering him. It was guilt. Guilt that he hadn't followed up on that childhood vow or sense of mission.

The organist repeated a series of runs, and after a moment Amy spoke softly, "I'm sorry, Mark, I shouldn't have said that. I always seem to leap mouth-first into everything."

"It's all right."

But it wasn't all right, she brooded as they continued up the aisle. It was obvious that he was guilt-ridden and that the guilt spanned a much longer period of time than the incident with Erika.

Mark interrupted her thoughts, pointing to the magnificent windows filtering a rainbow of light through the colorful glass panes. "Two styles of windows."

"Oh, do you know about them?" Amy asked brightly. "Give me the tour."

She thought Mark looked more grateful for the shift in their conversation than for the opportunity to impress her with his knowledge. As he explained the glorious windows, it appeared evident that he knew a great deal about Christianity as well. But something was missing. Catherine had once said that the average distance between the head and the heart was approximately eighteen inches — that being the difference between an intellectual Christian and a true believer.

Amy trailed behind him, admiring what he termed the clerestory windows that were devoted to human endeavor. There were windows honoring John Glenn for exploration, Henry Ford for industry, Robert Frost for letters, Albert Einstein for natural science, and numerous others.

Later, as they passed the high altar, it occurred to her that perhaps she should pray, but Mark was already moving on. Following him through the iridescent light cast by the stained-glass windows, a feeling of peace and happiness descended upon her. She sensed that Mark felt it too.

had been surfacing more and more often lately. "*You* must understand why people become so thoroughly convinced about Christianity."

He shook his head. "You'd think so, coming from a family like mine. But as far as I know, it boils down to one thing: they say they have accepted Christ as their Savior. They feel a call."

A call. It was a nebulous word, indistinct. What exactly did it mean? Did God actually speak to these people? And, if so, did He speak audibly? Or did He use that "still small voice" mentioned in her Sunday school lessons? She found herself saying, "There must be something to it, or there wouldn't have been so many ministers and missionaries — and other Christians through the centuries."

"Yes — let's go in." Mark evaded further discussion by moving into the cathedral.

Then Mark failed to understand too, she decided with a faint sense of disappointment as she accompanied him into the majestic sanctuary.

Just beyond the main door, her eyes fell upon the baptismal font, which was no doubt stationed there because baptism was the sign — the sacrament — that some Christians claimed to be necessary for salvation. But was baptism everything? Both she and Valerie had been baptized as infants, yet Amy always struggled with the vague notion that the ritual itself had not made her a true Christian . . . nor had those years in Sunday school when she attended the classes, but gave no thought to the meaning of the Scripture or its place in her life. A quotation came to her now: "Baptism is the outward sign of an inward work." Had there been any "inward" work — some change in her heart? Or had her baptism been merely an empty formality?

She turned to the cathedral's nave, which rose skyward like a great inverted ark. Here and there among the pews, a few people prayed. Late afternoon sunshine beamed through the stained-glass windows, the rays shimmering with opalescent tones across the wooden pews. As she and Mark started down a side aisle in the awesome silence, organ music burst forth, resounding through the cathedral like a great heavenly voice.

Amy must have given a start because Mark commented with a smile, "Someone must be practicing."

"Yes, so it seems."

"Something by Bach, I think." He added, "I used to visit Grandfather's church sometimes after school and, when the music surprised me like that, I would pretend that . . ." He hesitated, then chuckled, ". . . that God was playing the organ."

She smiled, trying to visualize Mark as a small boy, but her memories carried her back in time only to his teen years. "How little I really know you —"

"You haven't missed much," he said unhappily. His eyes darted toward her in a momentary appeal, betraying a flicker of guilt that made her reach out her hand to his. As he clasped it, his expression filled with a warmth as intimate as their touch.

that theory with the fact that your father was a medical missionary — and your grandfather, a minister?"

"Ministers and missionaries are the exception," he responded easily. Obviously he had thought the matter through. "Besides, in both instances in my family, the men were married to very spiritual women."

"Really?" Mark continued to surprise her.

"Would you like to take a look at some of the hotels?" He took her hand, drawing it through his arm.

"I'd love to." But her mind was not wholly on the grand old structures sprawling atop Nob Hill.

As she walked with Mark alongside Huntington Park, she was mentally reviewing their conversation. It didn't make sense. Why should women be different from men in matters of religion? Or did she mean Christianity? Catherine had once defined religion as "man's search for God," and Christianity, as "God's reach to mankind." *Well,* Amy thought, *at any rate, if women were indeed "different," she certainly wasn't one of them.* She opened her notebook and turned her attention to Mark's comments about the hotels.

Later, when they headed for Grace Cathedral, she made notes about its north tower — the Singing Tower — named for its carillons. As they approached the cathedral's magnificent doors, she remarked knowledgeably, "The Ghiberti Doors of Paradise. They're copies of the bronze doors from the baptistry of San Giovanni in Florence, Italy. It's said that when Michelangelo saw them he told his friend Ghiberti, 'They are so beautiful they could grace the entrance to Paradise.' "

Mark darted a pleased glance at her, looking more impressed with her research than with Michelangelo's veneration. "That should be of interest to our Italian tourists. Perhaps we'll add the cathedral to some of our itineraries. The doors should at least be mentioned in the San Francisco brochures."

Together they examined the panels depicting Old Testament accounts of the creation of mankind and of early Jewish history. There were Adam and Eve — their creation, sin, and expulsion from the Garden of Eden — as well as Cain and Abel, Noah after the Flood, Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, and other biblical events that seemed familiar, even after long years away from the teachings of her church. Amy was strangely moved by the sense of reverence conveyed by the artist.

"Someone donated quite a lot of money to have those doors made," Mark commented.

She nodded uncomfortably. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand why people would bequeath their entire estates to churches . . . or become ministers . . . or missionaries, for that matter. My parents and Gram were devout Christians, and Gramp believed in the end too, though he didn't talk much about it, and now Valerie —" She confronted Mark with the issue that

ways until evening, when they dined with his colleagues and business acquaintances in some of the city's fabulous restaurants. It was wonderfully romantic, although Amy was still uncertain about Mark's feelings for her — beyond the obvious physical attraction.

On Wednesday she toured Muir Woods, visited the giant redwoods, walked the picturesque streets of the artists' seaside colony of Sausalito, and was back just in time to take the narrated Bay Cruise. Returning to the suite at four o'clock, she was surprised by Mark's arrival within minutes after hers. "You're early!"

"I skipped out on a dull meeting," he replied, giving her a fast hug. As if a warning bell sounded in his head, he stepped back almost too quickly. "Are you up to climbing Nob Hill?"

"Yes, of course — it's still on my list of places to see." She tried to sound enthusiastic, but Mark's indecisive attitude toward her was puzzling. At times, he seemed passionately attracted to her, then suddenly withdrew for no apparent reason; at other times, he appeared to think long and hard before even holding her hand, then was overcome by passion. Gramp would probably have said, "He's blowing hot and cold." That's what he'd said about Thom's actions toward Valerie for a period during their courtship. If Mark's ambivalence weren't so unnerving, Amy might have smiled it off as a trait of the Marston males. Still, it was such a joy to be in his presence that there was no point in being downcast.

Outside, Mark took note of her high heels and asked the doorman to flag a cab.

It wasn't too many minutes later that they were driving up the almost perpendicular street, and she understood why Mark had decided to take the cab. "I had been warned that San Francisco was hilly, but this is ridiculous! I'm sure there must be mountains that are not this steep!"

Mark chuckled. "And that's not the only reason for the term 'steep.' "

Glancing around at the elegant hilltop hotels and apartments, Amy said, "I see what you mean. Only millionaires could afford to live here." Catching sight of a tall spire, she gestured, "That's Grace Cathedral. I've read about it. Could we stop here? I'd really like to see it."

He cocked a quizzical brow. "May I ask why?"

"It's an historic landmark," she explained a trifle defensively. "Besides, don't you think that some of your tourists would like to know a little about it? I suppose that some of them are Christians, and others might be interested in the architecture —"

"You're right," he replied with a nod. "Now you see why I need a woman's perspective."

She blinked. "What does being a woman have to do with it?"

"It seems that women are usually more intuitive . . . more open and religious than men."

I agree with your first point . . . but more religious? How do you reconcile

6

After breakfast in the hotel coffee shop the next morning, Amy decided that her passionate faux pas had not cooled Mark's ardor after all. Perhaps he had only been concerned with protecting her from herself!

"If only we could spend the day together," he said wistfully as they exited into the hotel lobby. "You'll be all right, won't you?"

"Of course."

He dropped a warm kiss on her cheek. "See you then at six." He paused. "Amy —"

Her heart thumped erratically. "Yes?"

His gaze fastened on her for a long moment. "At six," he repeated and smiled tenderly at her before he took off.

He must realize by now how much she loved him, she reasoned; yet there was still an atmosphere of quiet constraint on his part. For one thing, he had not told her he loved her, nor so much as called her "dear" or "darling," although the endearing sound of them filled his voice when he pronounced her name.

But there would be time to ponder her situation later. Right now, she thought, glancing at her watch, there was a tour bus to catch. Just as she stepped outside, the bus was pulling up to the hotel entrance. Work would be a pleasant diversion from her thoughts, for never had she expected to find a job so enjoyable.

After picking up tourists at the major hotels, the tour began with the civic center, opera house, and Old Mission Dolores; later, there was a stop at Twin Peaks for a panoramic view. Once Amy and her fellow tourists had snapped pictures, they drove on through the lushness of Golden Gate Park and visited the Japanese Tea Garden. The drive continued along the Great Highway to the ocean, where they stopped for a seaside look at seals sunning on the rocks near Cliff House. Then it was on to the Presidio and across the Golden Gate Bridge to Vista Point for another view of the bay and Alcatraz Island. By the time they reached Fisherman's Wharf and Pier 39, Amy felt very much at home. It would be easy to capture on paper the various impressions of a place she had already come to love.

As the week progressed, the pattern of the days fell into a comfortable routine. After breakfast together, Amy and Mark parted to go their separate

"Good-night, Mark," she called faintly.

Oh, what must he think of her now? She had practically forced herself on him. Would she never learn how to act, what to say, what *not* to say to a man? Perhaps her reckless declaration had already driven him away.

She glanced at the bouquet on the coffee table. Since she had placed them there that afternoon, the beautiful roses seemed to have drooped ever so slightly. And, as if in confirmation of her fears, a single petal fell, drifting slowly to the floor.

admitted into this congenial circle of friends who met only occasionally but obviously with great enthusiasm. After their initial curiosity about her relationship with Mark was appeased, the conversation turned to business: the last convention in Dallas, new promotions by the Mexican tourist bureau, last month's tour of China, the devaluation of the *escudo* in Portugal.

"How exciting it all sounds!" Amy said as Mark caught her eye. "I'd never really considered travel from behind the scenes. It's fascinating!"

"I hoped you'd be interested," he responded with pleasure. "I believe it was Augustine who said, 'The world is a great book, of which they who never stir from home read only a page.' "

"And don't forget the old adage about the bee," Dixie put in. " 'A bee, though it finds every rose has a thorn, comes back loaded with honey from his rambles . . . why shouldn't other tourists do the same?' "

"That's new to me," Mark said, chuckling with the others.

"The only reason ah happen to know it," Dixie admitted, "is because ah happened to quote it in my last client mailing."

Delightful as Dixie was, Amy couldn't help wishing the woman didn't have quite so much in common with Mark.

After dinner a rousing speech was delivered from the head table, then there was an announcement of the meetings and seminars to be held the rest of the week.

When it was all over, Dixie suggested with a facetious sparkle, "Why don't y'all come to my hotel suite to continue the — ah — discussion at hand." The invitation was accepted with alacrity.

As if in explanation, one of the other female travel agents said to Amy, "We all love Dixie."

Amy pasted on a smile. "How nice."

Yet several hours later, in Dixie's suite, Amy learned that her envy of the lovely southerner was unfounded. Dixie was happily married and spoke glowingly of her husband at home. So she *was* just a friend of Mark's, Amy thought with a great flood of relief. *Just a friend.*

It was midnight when Amy and Mark returned to their hotel suite. In the taxi on the way back, Mark had been thoughtfully distant, as though turning something over carefully in his mind. But in the suite the pink roses on the coffee table were a fragrant reminder of the afternoon they had spent together.

He drew her slowly into his arms. "I'm not so sure," he murmured, his breath warm in her hair, "that this is such a good idea."

"But it is!" she protested. "Oh, Mark, it's a wonderful idea."

His arms tightened, crushing her against him. Exhilarated by the events of the day, Amy lifted her lips to his, initiating a fervent kiss.

Almost immediately he backed away. "Good-night, Amy." And, as she stood watching in dismay, Mark strode purposefully toward his room and closed the door firmly behind him.

from one elegant shop to another, she took extensive notes. Her only purchase was a lovely turquoise scarf she found on sale, persuaded only slightly by the saleslady's insistence that it matched her eyes to perfection.

She returned to the hotel by five, carrying her roses for which the housekeeper provided a crystal vase. Since tonight's welcoming dinner at the travel agents' convention would commence at seven with a social hour, there was time for a bubble bath.

At six o'clock she heard Mark enter the suite. "I'm home!" he called out, and she couldn't help thinking how much like a husband returning from the day's work he sounded to her.

"I'm dressing —," she replied spontaneously, then wondered whether announcing that fact was such a brilliant idea.

Mark hesitated only an instant. "I'll be ready in half an hour."

She entered their living room first and sat down on the elegant couch, hoping he would approve of her dress; she had made it herself for Val's wedding festivities. A lovely shade of peach, the gown was extremely flattering, with its bias layers skimming her hips to swirl just below her knees.

When Mark stepped into the room wearing a midnight blue suit, he smiled with pleasure. "You're even lovelier than the roses," he said, glancing at the bouquet on the coffee table. Catching her hands in his, he drew her slowly from the couch. She thought he would kiss her, but he noted her fresh lipstick and evidently changed his mind. Perhaps just as well too, she thought, hurriedly grabbing her purse and leaving the room with him.

When they arrived at the San Francisco Room of the convention hotel, the predinner social hour was well underway. Dixie and her friends spotted them first.

"We've saved y'all seats at our table. Ah do hope that's all right."

"We *all* thank you," Mark mocked. "I wanted to discuss the latest travel scene in the South with you anyhow. Which reminds me, I need to find Tony Sanca to set up a dinner. Have you seen him?"

"At the buffet, where else?" she responded with humor, then grew serious. "Just wait until y'all see what's new with him."

Mark raised a speculative eyebrow, but didn't inquire. Excusing themselves, he took Amy's hand, and they threaded their way through the crush of people.

"Tony!" Mark called, recognizing the fiftyish man holding court near the sumptuous array of canapes; he held a drink in one hand and an hors d'oeuvre in the other.

Tony waved at Mark, a diamond ring gleaming from his little finger, but continued his animated discussion with a younger man.

"I'll have to get to him later," Mark said.

At seven-thirty everyone settled at round damask-covered tables in the adjacent dining room, and an army of busboys and waiters began to serve the prime rib dinner. Amy, unsure of what to expect, found herself quickly

shops that, according to Mark, had inspired renovations of old buildings all over the country. She took detailed notes, not forgetting to describe the well-known fountain with its bronze mermaid.

"I'll be back in a minute," Mark said and departed before she could ask where he was going so abruptly.

She concentrated on her notes, then was amazed to see him return with a bouquet of pink roses which he presented to her with a courtly bow.

"Oh, Mark, you shouldn't have!"

He slipped an arm around her waist. "But the color reminded me of your cheeks when you blush."

She obliged again, dipping her head to inhale the sweet perfume of the petals. She could scarcely believe it. Never before had men given her flowers. Yet on Friday, Rob had brought her daisies. And now these.

"Time for dessert," Mark announced.

"But I told you I couldn't possibly eat dessert!"

He laughed, pulling her lightly to her feet and leading her to the Ghirardelli ice cream parlor. "You'll find room for this."

Inside, Amy was intrigued by the old-fashioned tables and chairs. In the rear of the huge room, men stirred chocolate in huge vats, turning out chocolate bars with the antique equipment just as it had been done in the early days of the factory.

Overcome by the rich aroma, Amy said, "Well, maybe I could manage a small dessert after all."

"I thought so," he said with a grin. "What will it be?"

They both chose chocolate concoctions topped with whipped cream and nuts, and carried them out to a round marble-topped table on the adjacent patio. In the shade of sprawling trees, they devoured every mouth-watering bite.

"It was far too delicious," Amy pronounced.

"So are you," he returned.

"Oh, Mark —" She simply didn't know how to handle the rash of compliments he had been bestowing on her all day.

At length he checked his watch. "Two-thirty. I'm afraid it's time to start back."

"Yes, I suppose it is." She rose reluctantly, wishing the glorious afternoon could go on forever. Still, they would be taking the cable car back downtown . . . and Mark had told the fisherman with the parrot on his shoulder that they would return someday. She could carry that thought with her . . . along with the fragrant bouquet of pink roses.

Leaving Mark at a cable car stop near the hotel, Amy continued on alone, city map in hand. It seemed a perfect time to explore the exclusive shops lining Union Square. Mark had mentioned that his foreign clients might appreciate a few comments about each of the major stores. Making her way

"Is the lady hungry?" Mark's hearty voice belied the tender look of a moment earlier. "Methinks, if we follow our noses, we're sure to find nourishment."

Amy had to laugh in spite of herself. "How can you be hungry — after that enormous buffet this morning?"

"The fresh sea air, my dear. Does wonders for the appetite."

"And the waistline!" Amy moaned. But she followed Mark dutifully to a seafood restaurant overlooking the sparkling water.

Though Mark insisted she try at least a taste of his golden rings of deep-fried calamari with a tartar sauce, she held firm and ordered only a small tomato and anchovy salad with vinaigrette dressing. Served with the city's renowned sourdough bread, it proved to be an excellent choice.

Outside the window of the restaurant Amy could see the Golden Gate Bridge arching through the sky, carrying cars to the green hills of Marin County. Closer at hand, hundreds of sailboats and yachts skimmed the waters of the bay, while the heavier ships of commerce plied their course through the deeper channel. So many people going about their daily affairs . . . so much happening in the world around her . . . yet she felt strangely detached from all of it.

Mark was speaking to her. "Dessert? Amy, would you care for dessert?"

A waiter hovered nearby, pen poised to take her order.

"Oh, no, thank you. I couldn't eat another bite."

Shaking off the wistful mood, she gathered her belongings and left the restaurant with Mark, stepping out into the bright sunlight of reality.

They strolled along the bay to Fisherman's Wharf, where the fish market and famous seafood restaurants overlooked another sea of masts. A fisherman, wearing a parrot on one shoulder and a patch over his eye, shouted, "Seafood cocktails, mateys! Shrimp! Crab! Clam chowder!" He turned to Amy. "How about it, pretty lady?"

She gave a laugh and patted her trim tummy. "Sorry! We've just eaten — again!" It occurred to her, however, that this "fisherman-pirate" was another character to enliven the information about San Francisco for foreign visitors.

"We'll be back another time," Mark was saying. He caught Amy's hand in his as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do.

How wonderful it felt merely to have his warm hand engulfing hers, Amy marveled as they wandered along the bay. They stopped for a while at the Cannery, an old brick building that had been renovated. While retaining the charm of its past history, the structure now housed modern specialty shops and restaurants with sidewalk tables, where a juggler entertained the passing crowds. Beyond, in Golden Gate Aquatic Park, there was a wine museum and a maritime museum. Torn between tourist attractions, spectacular scenery, and Mark, it was all Amy could do to make sensible notes.

In Ghirardelli Square they saw the famous chocolate factory with its chic

calliope music from a colorful carousel floated through the salty air, imparting a carnival mood to the setting.

Amy pulled out her notebook and headed for a nearby bench. "Do you mind? I'd better start making notes now or I'll never be able to remember everything."

"Good idea," Mark agreed, settling down beside her. His warm hands brushed her neck as he reached beneath her long hair to turn up her suit collar. "Don't want you to get a chill."

"Thanks —," she began, but his hands were still on her shoulders, drawing her to him. A long look passed between them, and quite suddenly, for a breathless instant, his lips pressed hers before he released her.

"Oh, Mark —" She sat back to catch her breath, savoring the slightly salty taste of his lips, the clean smell of his aftershave. It was awhile before the calliope music intruded and she remembered that they were in a public place.

"Sorry," he shrugged. "You always look so tempting that I just couldn't resist."

Tempting! What had gotten into him? Perhaps it was only the carnival atmosphere. But she returned his smile before quickly opening her notebook.

"Business before pleasure?" Mark observed.

"Something like that." It escaped Amy how she could possibly concentrate on the report with Mark sitting beside her, especially when she so wanted to touch the creases of amusement playing around those sensuous lips.

Suddenly the blonde — Dixie — came to mind with her parting words: "Y'all have fun — heah? Ah know you will." Just how much *did* Dixie know about Mark? Amy steeled herself against his disconcerting presence and her own imaginings and began to write.

Later, as they wandered through specialty shops selling everything from coats of arms and kitchen equipment to woolens and toys, they discussed where they might have lunch. There was a plethora of restaurants, both American and international, in addition to those specializing in seafood. Pier 39, it appeared, was a must for foreign tourists to San Francisco.

At the end of the pier they sat upon a weathered wooden bench to enjoy the unfolding panorama of the bay. "The view alone is worth the trip," Amy sighed, then extracted her notebook once again, jotting down notes to orient tourists who would be seeing this scene for the first time: *To the left, beyond the bay, are the green hills of Marin County . . . to the right, Angel Island. . . .* Later, when she was alone, she would record the effect of the moment upon her senses. Or was this delicious giddiness caused by the nearness of the man beside her?

They rose and stood together at the railing. "It's all so breathtakingly beautiful, isn't it?" she asked, but as their eyes met, the deeper significance of her words flashed between them. She turned to blink away a sudden blur of tears.

Amy blushed. "Not exactly —"

Mark interrupted, "All set. See you ladies at the meetings."

Dixie called after them, "Y'all have fun — heah? Ah know you will."

Amy caught Mark's sidelong glance and pretended not to have noticed. Unsure what to think of this most recent episode, she decided to reserve judgment.

"Let's get started —," he said hastily, "and the best place is aboard a cable car."

Not waiting for a response, he took her arm and ushered her outside. Launching into the history of San Francisco's most famous attraction, Mark told her that someone had taken pity on the poor horses that had sometimes slipped and broken their legs on the steep hillsides — hence, the first cable cars.

When the two of them arrived at the stop, early morning commuters still crowded the red cars, and Amy and Mark had to wait their turn.

"Where are we going?" she inquired as they boarded the next available car.

"Pier 39, Ghirardelli Square, Fisherman's Wharf," Mark replied, looking relaxed, almost carefree. "We'll do some of the footwork for your report today. You'll have plenty of bus and boat riding the rest of the week."

The seats filled quickly, and they were forced to hang onto straps just as the cable car bell clanged, and the noisy, shimmying ride down the middle of the street began. Swaying on a strap beside Mark, Amy didn't object to his arm around her waist, finding protection and security in its steadying strength.

The cable car operator chatted loudly with the passengers, calling out street names and amusing items of information.

"They're usually characters," Mark commented.

"A dash of local color," Amy laughed. "I'll be sure to include him in the report. No doubt your foreign clients have 'characters' in their countries too."

She also made a mental note to mention the everchanging views. Beyond the downtown area, houses and apartment buildings climbed the steep incline, presenting the beautiful scenes she had often seen of the city in magazines and on television.

While they clanged to a stop an engaging scene took place near the site of an excavation. A little old lady was clambering over the rubble with the help of a workman who had just crawled out of a manhole in the street. As she reached the other side, she turned and waved her thanks. The workman smiled and bowed as the woman proceeded to make her way up the precipitus sidewalk.

"That's San Francisco for you, folks," the cable man laughed. "You'll leave your hearts here."

The riders groaned at his attempted humor.

All too soon the invigorating ride was over, and the passengers were disembarking at Pier 39 — an old docking area that had been transformed into a nautical tourist attraction with weathered gray buildings. At the entrance,

and muffins.

She filled her plate with a little of everything and found that Mark's plate was piled even higher. Their tentative smiles were given and received in an atmosphere of reconciliation. Today might turn out fine, after all.

The state of truce lasted through breakfast and during their invigorating walk in the early morning sunshine to the Moscone Convention Center where the travel agents' convention was being held. The air had cooled during the night, and, when they stopped for a light on a street corner, Amy had to hold down her skirt against the sudden gusts of wind.

Mark grinned as the fickle breeze whipped his hair. "Not balmy Southern California, is it?"

"Not quite!"

San Francisco by day was entirely different from the mellow mood of the evening before. The city throbbed again with energy as workers flooded into shops and offices, and tourists, bedecked with cameras, wandered out of their hotels reading street maps. Excitement, it seemed, beckoned around every corner.

At the convention center's registration counter Mark quickly checked on the day's meetings, then the available tours, booking Amy on outings for Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday.

"But what about today?" she inquired as they stood at the tour reservation counter.

"There's nothing of importance for me to do until three-thirty, and the welcoming dinner isn't until tonight. I thought this would be a good time to show you around."

"Oh?" she asked, but he was preoccupied with the paperwork. She had been under the impression that she would be researching the city on her own.

"Why, Mark Marston!" exclaimed a stunning blonde with a southern accent. "Ah was hopin' you'd be heah. Ah haven't seen you in ages!"

Just behind her were several others, equally delighted to see Mark again. He quickly introduced Amy to a stately brunette from New York, a platinum beauty from Minneapolis, and the blonde from Atlanta, appropriately named Dixie. They examined Amy with interest when Mark called her "an old friend from home." She had already noticed that the composition of the crowd flooding the convention center included far more women than men — and that apparently a great many of the prettier women knew Mark.

As he signed up for the three-thirty meeting, Dixie said to Amy, "Ah do hope you aren't going to deprive us of our favorite escort. Mark is always such a deah to take us around at the conventions. You know how it is — women alone in a big city."

Amy smiled with difficulty. "I'm afraid you'll have to ask Mark. I don't know his plans."

"You don't?" Dixie replied, her blue eyes dancing. "Aren't y'all stayin' together?"

"I'm sorry. Since I seldom dine in restaurants, I really don't know. No doubt I'll learn all about being alone when I move into my apartment next month."

He gazed thoughtfully at the steam rising from his coffee cup. "I don't imagine you'll be alone for long."

"I'm not quite sure I know what you mean."

"As Rob mentioned Friday night, you're very beautiful. He or some other fellow will move in with you —"

She interrupted angrily. "What makes you think I'd allow a man to move in with me?"

"Isn't that what everyone is doing?"

"I don't care what everyone is doing!" she retorted.

He sat back in his seat with a slow smile. "I don't think you'll be so different . . . once you accept the fact that men find you . . . desirable."

"If you think that's a compliment, you're badly mistaken!" She couldn't believe this kind of talk coming from a minister's grandson . . . the son of missionaries. To avoid his eyes, she sipped the hot coffee, her hands trembling.

"You'll change," Mark assured her.

If he had been baiting her, he had certainly succeeded, she thought as she rose from the table in a huff. "You're wrong . . . I'm not that kind of woman!" she flung at him, hurrying to the buffet to escape this upsetting confrontation.

He was behind her in a moment, following her through the Victoriana and greenery to the next room, his low voice compelling. "Look, Amy, I'm sorry. It wasn't fair of me to goad you like that, but I didn't sleep well last night."

She glanced up at him through her lashes, not quite hiding her astonishment. Taken aback by his candor her anger began to subside, though she didn't intend to let him off too easily. "You're right, Mark, it wasn't fair, particularly since you don't seem to know me very well. . . . You were testing me, weren't you?"

"Maybe."

"Then I hope you know where I stand."

"You didn't leave much doubt." His slow grin did funny things to her heart. "Truce?"

"Truce," she agreed gratefully. They had had a lovers' quarrel — of all things.

"Perhaps you *are* different, Amy."

"I guess I am," she said, mustering a small smile before turning to the buffet.

It was a glorious display — mounds of fresh pineapple, grapes, strawberries, oranges, grapefruit, bananas, a variety of melons, and assorted juices. Great copper lids crowned pans of scrambled eggs, hash browns, corned beef hash, bacon, sausage, hot cakes, cheeses, and even small steaks. At a table nearby, trays were heaped with freshly baked breads, croissants, rolls,

"I couldn't help seeing you and Rob on the beach Friday night."

Nonplussed, she hurried past him to the door. "That wasn't 'intended' either, as you put it." Did Mark assume that she allowed men to kiss her indiscriminately?

He closed the door behind them, his forehead furrowed. "It's not that I didn't enjoy kissing you."

She averted her eyes to the corridor's creamy wallpaper so that he wouldn't see that she had enjoyed it too, but he must have read her expression because his voice deepened and caught huskily, "Amy —?"

She swallowed hard, her instincts telling her that a single word or gesture would trigger another embrace. But then he would probably say he didn't *intend* that either! *The road to Hell is paved with good intentions,* Gramp had always warned, and she supposed it was true, particularly in the realm of love.

She started irresolutely down the corridor. Never having rehashed a romantic encounter with a man, she could already see that it was dangerous ground, fraught with ruts, and that she would likely stumble even more if they pursued the subject.

Entering the crowded elevator, Mark tried to slip a protective arm around her, but she edged away. The memory of Glynia's nightgown in his bathroom only yesterday morning returned to her now like a specter. She concentrated on the elevator's blinking floor numbers, trying to resist the inclination to luxuriate in his nearness. Perhaps it was only physical attraction she was feeling.

"I thought we'd eat in the coffee shop." The moment they stepped out into the lobby, Mark nodded toward a charming trellised doorway. Here, the interior designer had avoided the hotel's more formal decor in favor of a cheerful and inviting warmth.

Amy began to relax. Waiting at the door to be seated, she wondered what Mark might be thinking. That he had made a monumental mistake last night by kissing her? That he should never have brought her to San Francisco in the first place? She opened her shoulder bag and extracted a tour map, but it was a long time before she could focus clearly on the maze of streets, hills, and famous landmarks.

When they were settled amid ferns and antiques at a small corner table, Mark bestowed a conciliatory smile upon her. "I'm glad I don't have to eat breakfast alone this morning."

She looked at him over her menu, still feeling annoyed. Did he mean that he preferred to eat breakfast in her company — or would just any woman do?

Ignoring his remarks, she shrugged guiltily, then turned to watch the busboy pour their coffee; at least its aroma helped to dispel her irritation with Mark and with herself. What a mess she was making of things this morning.

After the busboy left, Mark continued, "I simply said that I don't like to eat breakfast alone, and you looked at me like thunder. I don't know what you're assuming, but the fact is that I've never enjoyed eating any meal by myself in a restaurant."

5

The next day as Amy stepped into the living room, Mark was watching the eight o'clock news on television.

"Good morning," she called cheerfully as though nothing momentous had happened last night, as though their breathtaking kiss had simply been an illusion. Her eyes dropped from the curiosity in his expression to his clothing, finding a casual urbanity about his navy blazer, white open-necked shirt, tan slacks, and leather loafers.

"You're looking bright-eyed," he said, rising from the couch. "Ready for breakfast?"

Nodding, she answered with a twinge of nervousness, "All set for a hard day's work." Glancing down at her own navy suit and tailored white blouse, it occurred to her that their matching ensembles might appear planned, though it apparently didn't occur to him as his approving gaze roamed over her slim figure.

He started toward the door.

"Shall I turn off the TV?" she asked, just behind him.

"Yes, thanks — I forgot."

She headed for the armoire that housed the TV set, and he added with a note of apology, "It appears that I forgot something else . . . I forgot myself last night too. I didn't intend for — that to happen."

"Well, if you think *I* intended such a thing —," she sputtered. This was really the limit. Hadn't Mark made himself abundantly clear last night? In the ensuing silence she said, "Oh, well, what's a little kiss between two old friends. The best thing to do is to forget the whole thing."

Mark echoed her private thoughts. "Is it that easy to forget?"

She had lain awake remembering every detail of the evening, particularly their kiss, but on such treacherous grounds an indifferent answer seemed her only resort. "Why not?"

From the pained reaction on his face, she knew she had erred again. If only they could somehow begin the morning all over again! This was not at all what she had hoped.

He lifted an eyebrow. "At least I know it's not the first time you've been kissed."

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"Amy —" His low voice caressed her name as it had that foggy night on the patio, and she turned to him like a leaf bending to the wind.

"Yes?"

His eyes darkened with passion, and, as if in a dream, they moved toward each other. His arms opened and her shoulders stiffened only a trifle as his hands gripped them, drawing her to him. He was so close that she could feel his warm breath waft through her hair.

"Mark —" But her protest was only half-hearted. Her pulse pounded wildly in her ears and, instead of resisting, she found herself tilting her head up to his. As their lips met, his hands splayed across her back, lifting her to him, and she felt such a rush of happiness that all resistance vanished.

Mark! her heart cried, *Oh, Mark!* She felt his chest expand. Her hands encircled the strong column of his neck, threading her fingers through his hair. It was as if theirs was the first kiss on earth and that she had waited through all eternity to receive it — like Adam and Eve —

Quite suddenly the thought of the hapless biblical pair and the afternoon's *faux pas* with the apple brought Amy to her senses. Firming her resolve, she pressed her hands against Mark's unyielding chest. "No —," she said against her own wishes.

He backed away instantly, the expression on his face revealing his remorse. "I didn't intend to —"

He didn't intend to *what?* To hold her? To kiss her? For things to get out of control? She hadn't planned for this to happen either, but it had! Turning from the consternation clouding his face, she hastened to her door.

"Good-night, Mark!" She brushed her fingers across her lips as if to erase his imprint. Her mind was whirling. Opening her door she turned and found him still gazing at her.

He looked as uncertain as she felt. "Good-night, Amy."

She shut the door behind her, quickly flipping the lock, although this time she was uncertain whom she was trying to protect. All she knew was that, after she had idolized him for so many years, Mark had kissed her. It seemed far too wonderful to be true. So why should she feel so confused? And why had he said . . . *that he hadn't intended to?*

precious gems to the fine crystal and china and even the housewares displayed in store windows.

"I thought men didn't especially care about such things."

"Must be a family trait . . . knowing a little about everything, but never quite enough about anything."

"A Renaissance man?"

"Hardly. You ought to know better than that."

"But I don't really know you well," she objected, "and it seems so strange not to — after all these years." For an instant she wished she had held her tongue, then to her relief she found Mark smiling at her.

"It does seem odd," he agreed. "I suppose it's because there were so many years between us."

"But I'm not a little girl anymore, Mark."

His face took on a wry expression. "So I've been noticing."

"Well, it's about time!"

Probably he interpreted her protest as a bid to be considered an equal, nothing more. Yet, their exchange seemed to have cleared away the last vestiges of tension between them.

As her high-heeled sandals tapped on the sidewalk, Amy realized that this was the first time all day — possibly the first time in years — that she had felt entirely at ease with Mark. The constant strain she had experienced in his presence had vanished in the evening air. It was as if their relationship of years ago had been changing subtly, shifting to a new plateau . . . as if they were no longer strangers.

After their stroll around Union Square, they walked down to California and Market Streets, then back again, enjoying the sights and sounds of the city.

"Guess we'd better turn in," he sighed at last.

At his words she felt a small stirring of alarm. "Yes. It's going to be a busy week."

Upon reaching the hotel, her uneasiness grew. Alone in the elevator with him, she couldn't think of a thing to say. Mark, too, was silent. When the doors opened, she exited in the wrong direction.

"This way," Mark said, waiting patiently.

Once again, she felt the heat stealing into her cheeks.

His gaze rested on her an instant too long, and she glanced away. The air around them seemed charged with a peculiar electricity.

As they stepped to their door, he quickly unlocked it and stood aside to let her into the dimly lit room. She moved past him, her shoulder brushing against his suit jacket, imparting such a physical jolt that she caught her breath. She hurried into the living room and heard Mark close the door behind them.

"Thank you for a wonderful evening," she managed to say evenly before starting for her room.

He smiled at her over his lobster thermidor. "You don't strike me as the type who is easily bored."

"Thank you . . . I guess." She felt a flutter of nervousness under his scrutiny, and quickly changed the subject. "Tell me what I should see, do and know about San Francisco."

"Now that's a tall order. It's quite a place."

As he launched into a discussion of the city and its environs, Amy made mental notes of the places to investigate: Union Square, Ghirardelli Square, Fisherman's Wharf, The Cannery, Golden Gate Park, Chinatown, Muir Woods, Sausalito — the list seemed endless and exotic.

Over coffee and their shared dessert — a generous slice of chocolate-topped cheesecake — Mark continued to wax eloquent about the touristic possibilities. He concluded, "I want you to take a fresh look at the city, to see it not only from a woman's viewpoint, but from that of a first-time tourist. Most of our foreign tourists will see it only once."

"I'll try," she promised, hoping that she would do the work justice.

After calling for the check, Mark added, "I'll have some time off to show you around."

"Oh —?"

"Do you mind?"

"Of course not," she replied. "It's just that I was assuming you'd be too busy with the convention . . . that I'd be on my own." It struck her as strange that he had not told her sooner.

As he ushered her out of the dining room, his fingers lightly touched her elbow, sending a small tremor through her arm. Her eyes darted to his face and found him looking as startled as she felt. "Thank you for the — the marvelous dinner."

"My pleasure," he responded, his blue eyes glowing with warmth.

For an instant she thought he was going to reach for her hand, and she quickly transferred her white clutch bag to render her hand unavailable. Apparently he was unaware of her deliberate maneuver; instead, he cast a skeptical glance at her white high-heeled sandals. "Are you up to a stroll around Union Square?"

"Of course. It sounds like a good way to walk off dinner and to start my report," she replied in a light-hearted yet businesslike tone. She would have to keep her mind on the job at hand, she reminded herself as they crossed the hotel lobby, and now was as good a time as any to begin.

Outside, the air was surprisingly still and warm, and the sidewalks no longer crowded with homebound pedestrians. Lights softly illuminated the park in the middle of Union Square, highlighting the lawns, trees, and flowers, and imparting an atmosphere of serenity in the midst of the city.

As they strolled along together, a comfortable camaraderie settled between them, and Amy found herself conversing easily about the shops and their wares with Mark. He seemed knowledgeable about everything from the

learning the art of delegation."

"I'm not sure you could have talked me into painting an entire fence."

"I might have tried if I'd had a fence to paint. As a matter of fact, I've been remembering more and more about us, some of it entirely reprehensible on my part. I don't know how you put up with me."

Put up with you?! Amy couldn't believe he hadn't suspected her true feelings. *I thought you were the most wonderful being on earth!* Outwardly, she kept a firm grip on her emotions and answered with a cool detachment. "Oh, it was difficult, but I managed. You weren't so bad — for an adolescent." Even Glynia couldn't have topped that bit of repartee.

Studying her menu again, Mark was hidden from view. What an idol she had made of him . . . and he had probably considered her a chubby little nuisance. Well, she still had to watch her weight, which was most unfortunate as the hotel dining room specialized in continental cuisine. When the waiter returned for their order, she ordered the medallions of veal with shallots and mushrooms instead of the calorie-laden lobster thermidor Mark had recommended.

Dinner began with dispatch, a busboy pouring tinkling ice water in their crystal goblets, their waiter presenting thick warm slices of French bread with the delicious house paté. Over crisp tossed salads their conversation turned to company business. Mark would soon be requiring additional reports on Eastern cities to add depth to some of the more extensive tours.

"Maybe you could write the reports for those too," he suggested. "I'll be stopping in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. between Thom's graduation and the wedding, then going to Boston and New York right after. At least, consider it."

"But you haven't even seen my first report," Amy protested, though she felt a surge of excitement at the prospect. "In all fairness, I think you ought to see my work first . . . and I'll need time to think about it too." She stalled, reluctant to commit herself to spending more time alone with Mark until she knew the outcome of this trip. "But I appreciate your confidence."

"There's no need for a decision yet." A glint of concern in his eyes gave the impression that he might already be having second thoughts about the offer. "You've never been back East, have you?"

She shook her head. "Would you believe that I've never been out of the state of California?"

"All the better. The last thing I need is a jaded traveler. This business takes someone with enthusiasm, energy, and a healthy dose of curiosity about people and places." He studied her thoughtfully, then was diverted as the waiter arrived with their main courses.

Perhaps Amy knew little about travel, but working for Catherine's Catering had piqued her interest in gourmet cooking, and she did know that the veal in its delectable French sauce was marvelous. She laughed ruefully. "I've heard about jaded travelers, but I doubt that I'll ever be bored with food!"

He grinned. "I do."

She might have asked precisely what it was that prompted such amusement, but they had arrived at the entry of the hotel dining room.

The maître d', resplendent in a black tuxedo, greeted them. "Good evening, sir, madame."

Their reservation was obviously in order, and he promptly led the way through damask-covered tables with crystal goblets and gleaming silver. Amy, with Mark behind her, was acutely aware that admiring eyes followed their passage through the sumptuous room.

After she was seated, Mark sat down across the table from her. The intensity of his gaze was disquieting, and she quickly looked away, pretending an inordinate interest in the antique wall tapestries and murals painted on the coved ceilings.

"I've never seen anything so exquisite. It's like a palace!"

"I've always thought so, except tonight it seems unusually palatial . . . perhaps because I'm escorting a princess."

"Now, Mark —" Attempting to make light of his comment, Amy hurried on. "I do feel a little like Cinderella, though. It was Friday, just two days ago, that I was scrubbing Gramp's kitchen floor when you came for me . . . and here I am now. It seems unreal, as if I might blink and this magnificent room, this enchanted city, you — everything will disappear."

He smiled, the creases around his lips deepening. "You're beautiful enough to be Cinderella."

Now thoroughly unnerved, Amy was grateful for the interruption of the waiter who had arrived with their oversized menus.

Mark's compliments were exhilarating, and she was enjoying them all too much. It behooved her to keep in mind that she was here to work, and that life would be returning to normal soon enough after the wedding . . . and that she would be returning to a new and empty apartment — alone. Still, such a magical evening deserved at least one wish and, before she knew it, that wish had slipped into her consciousness. Perhaps something wonderful would happen. Perhaps Mark would come to love her as she had loved him for so many years. If only he hadn't changed —

Over his menu Mark remarked, "I'd give quite a lot to know what you're thinking."

Ignoring the blush rising to her cheeks, she asked boldly, "How much?"

"A quarter?" he teased.

She laughed. "Very tempting."

"I recall when it worked."

"I do too!" She was relieved that the conversation seemed to be taking a healthier turn. Years ago Mark had bribed her with a quarter to paint the patio swing so he could play baseball with his friends. "It was a neat trick. I'll bet you learned how to avoid responsibility by reading *Tom Sawyer.*"

"No doubt," he said with a chuckle. "Except I'd prefer to think that I was

thinking that another man might have exploited a stay in such an elegant hotel just to impress her.

"Honesty?" He chuckled. "There's only been one minister in the family as far back as we know. Who knows what renegades lurk in my family tree?"

Mark has chosen a different path, Valerie had warned.

As they passed the hotel's sundries shop, Mark said, "I forgot to pack toothpaste." He eyed her small white clutch purse. "Do you suppose there'd be room for a small tube in your purse?"

She thought about offering to share her own toothpaste, but that would surely be inviting disaster, since he would have to wear a path to her door. "If it's very small."

"Maybe we'd better take care of that now," he said. "The shop might be closed by the time we've finished dinner."

She followed him into the brightly lit area and, as Mark made his purchase, Amy investigated the rack of paperback novels; several looked interesting, but there would be little time for casual reading on this trip. When she looked up, Mark was at the cash register, paying the bill, and two attractive women shoppers were eyeing him with great interest.

Mark must have noticed their attention, for he flushed under his tan as he strode over to Amy and handed her the toothpaste. "I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all." She tucked the small carton in her purse, thinking that at least he had the good grace to be embarrassed when women ogled him so brazenly while he was in the presence of a date . . . or, for all they knew, his wife.

Outside the shop, Amy suggested, "Tell me about the tours. I think I ought to know more about what American Holidays has to offer." She knew very little about the business — only that Mark had used money inherited from Catherine's mother to buy the agency when it was foundering, and that he wanted to put his education in finance and international relations to use.

While they made their way toward the dining room, Mark expounded upon the business and the countries from which most of his clients came — England, Germany, France, Japan, and Australia. The interests of the foreign tourists varied as widely as their nationalities. There were art and theater buffs, tennis and golf enthusiasts, bicyclists and hikers, culinary devotees —

"There are the tourists who want to ride through the country and see everything through bus windows, and the real travelers who want to experience places on their own," Mark explained. "It's a juggling act, trying to please everyone."

"Like everything else, I suppose, there's far more to it than meets the eye," Amy commented. "I'll do my best, though, Mark. I promise you that."

"I wouldn't have asked you if I hadn't thought so." He turned a dazzling smile on her. "Even when you were a little thing, you always aimed to please."

"I'm surprised that you remember."

"I remember a great deal about you."

"You do?"

"Thanks. Ready to go? It's a little early, but we could peruse the hotel shops before dinner."

"Fine. I'm eager to learn my way around."

He switched off the travel documentary on the television set. "Since we'll be so busy the rest of our time here, I haven't planned a big evening out tonight."

"Isn't it strange? I don't feel at all tired. Too excited, I suppose."

He leveled an ironic look at her, but said nothing, and she reminded herself that she must be more careful in her choice of words.

In the hallway he said almost too casually, "Oh, by the way, Rob phoned."

"Rob phoned? Here?"

"Yes, apparently he wanted to make sure we'd arrived safely."

"But you didn't call me —"

"I knocked on your door, but you didn't answer. It sounded as if your shower was running."

"Oh, you didn't tell him that I was in the — shower?"

He smiled broadly. "No. Only that you didn't answer when I knocked on your door." As if reading her thoughts, Mark added, "That seemed unsettling enough for him." He couldn't quite maintain a straight face.

She glared at him. "Thanks so much."

"Not at all," he responded with amusement.

"Any other calls?" It would not be surprising to hear that Valerie had phoned too, since everyone apparently assumed little Amy was unable to handle her life without help.

"No, just Rob. Don't tell me there's a whole string of boyfriends!"

"No . . . and Rob's not a boy. He *is* twenty-five years old!"

"I beg your pardon," Mark returned, not looking terribly apologetic.

Since he seemed so entertained by Rob's call, she was tempted to ask if he had talked to Glynia, but held her tongue. Besides, she was unsure whether she really wanted to know what transpired between the two of them.

Fortunately the elevator was empty so there was no one to scrutinize them on their descent.

Stepping out into the elegant lobby, Mark checked his watch. "We have twenty minutes for window-shopping along the way."

"Wonderful!"

Minutes later, they passed impressive hallway windows displaying the latest designer clothing, luxury toys, expensive candies, and perfumes. " 'Window-shopping' is the most accurate term for it!" Amy laughingly exclaimed. "Marvelous purchases for your foreign tourists to take home, if they happen to be very wealthy! I suppose this hotel is top dollar or franc or yen?"

He nodded. "It's one of the most expensive, but we try to arrange tours to meet all budgets. . . ." He paused. "Travel agents, of course, receive lower rates for convention visits such as this."

"The Marston streak for honesty coming out in you?" she teased,

4

Poised to leave her bedroom for dinner later in the evening, Amy glanced in the full-length mirror and was again pleasantly surprised to find the reflection of a slender young woman. She paused an instant longer to coax wisps of dark brown hair into curls to frame her face. Her hair, caught back in a soft coil at the nape of her neck, helped to achieve a semblance of sophistication as did the touches of turquoise eye shadow that heightened the color of her eyes. The white silky dress she had chosen, with its modest V-neck, long sleeves and slightly flared skirt, made her feel deliciously feminine.

She knew very well that her "look," as the fashion magazines termed it, was likely that of an ingénue dressed for cosmopolitan San Francisco. Unfortunately, she did not have the high-fashion flare of a Glynia, nor did she really want to resemble the models in the more outrageous fashion magazines. Despite her best efforts to effect an appearance somewhere between Glynia's glamorous one and her own, she hadn't quite brought it off; she still looked everlastingly and hopelessly unsophisticated . . . and young.

A tremor of anticipation stirred through her, and she took a deep breath to steady herself. She must not seem too eager. She allowed her eyes to sweep the bedroom, decorated in ivory, pale sea-green, and shades of peach. The room was neat, her belongings put away; there had been time to unpack, shower, and dress at leisure, but now it was seven-thirty. Mark had turned on the television set in the living room some time ago and was obviously waiting. Moreover, she was starved.

Catching up her white clutch bag from the bed, she hurried to the door. When she attempted to unlock it, the bolt snapped back into place loudly. She stepped out into the living room, expecting a wry comment from Mark.

But he quickly rose from the pale green couch, his eyes filled with undisguised admiration. "Don't you look lovely!"

"Thank you, Mark," she smiled, pleased by his sincere compliment. "You look nice yourself." To her own ears, her reply sounded abysmally trite. What would Glynia have said? And how did a woman tell a man that he was strikingly handsome, and that it didn't make a particle of difference if he were wearing jeans or a three-piece navy blue suit as Mark was tonight? His dark hair was neatly brushed, his face freshly shaven, and she had to quash an overwhelming urge to touch one of the creases by his lips with her fingertips.

and it made her feel awkward too. "Besides, there's food right here in the room. Your favorite — apples," she added, handing him the bowl of fruit that had been placed on the coffee table.

As he reached for a red apple, she could not resist saying, "Just like Adam and Eve —" She caught the incredulous look on Mark's face. "Oh, dear! Now I've done it!"

He burst into laughter, and she couldn't help smiling, though she knew her face was crimson.

"Now *that* I didn't expect from you," he said, still chuckling.

At least her blunder had relieved the tension between them. Selecting some grapes, she headed for her room. "See you later," she tossed back, though not as blithely as she had intended. Of all things to have said to Mark — and under these circumstances! Adam and Eve, indeed! She was instantly sobered by another thought from her Sunday school days. After the temptation in the Garden of Eden had come the fall.

Closing the bedroom door behind her, Amy noticed the lock. She turned it as slowly and quietly as possible, but the bolt slid into place with a loud snap, the sound no doubt carrying into the living room. Now Mark knew she didn't quite trust him, she thought ruefully. And maybe it was just as well! She had no intention of allowing him another easy conquest. *Her* nightgown would never hang on his bathroom door!

When she looked up, Mark was approaching with a bellman in tow. There was a curious intimacy suggested by their luggage, placed side by side on the portable rack. "All set."

In the elevator Amy noticed the stares of the other occupants. Did they think that she and Mark were newlyweds? Or that they —? She wondered what his grandfather, the minister, would say about the impression they might be giving. Oh, why had she agreed to come?

As the bellman let them into a seventh-floor suite, Amy felt as if she had walked into the pages of an exclusive house and garden magazine. The small living room, furnished with antiques, commanded a lovely view of the city and the bay. Doors on either side led to small but elegant bedrooms, each with its own bath. But she would never need all this space! Mark was being more than generous.

She opened her mouth to tell him so, when the bellman interrupted. "I hope this will be satisfactory, sir."

Mark turned to her, his blue eyes holding a question. "All right with you, Amy?"

Her mouth remained open! Mark expected to share this suite with her!

"Sorry about the mix-up sir," the bellman was saying.

Amy found her voice. "Mix-up?" she echoed stupidly.

"Through some error, they had booked us in one room." Mark looked uncomfortable.

"Happens in the best of hotels," the bellman injected hastily. "I'm surprised this suite was available, with the hotel so full."

"Yes," Mark agreed. "I made sure of that. What about it, Amy? It appears we have no choice."

She exhaled slowly. Was this a ruse? After the disturbing discovery of Glynia's nightgown earlier in the day, she hardly knew what to believe. But she supposed this arrangement was not much different from staying in the Marston home, with Mark's bedroom just down the hall from the guest room.

"I — I suppose it's all right."

The bellman showed them the television set, concealed behind the doors of a lovely walnut armoire, then placed the luggage in their rooms. Mark quickly handed the man folded bills.

"Thank you, sir," the bellman said, backing out with curious looks at both of them.

What must he really be thinking? Amy wondered again. Nowadays everyone seemed to assume the worst.

"I guess we ought to unpack," Mark suggested, still looking chagrined. "I've made reservations for dinner at eight in one of the dining rooms. I hope that's not too late for you."

"No, eight is fine." She didn't recall ever having seen Mark embarrassed,

Amy struggled to capture visual images on paper — "driving through the sky on the long Bay Bridge," "the perfect marriage of God's creativity and man's ingenuity," "sailboats skimming the surface of the sea; freighters plowing a watery furrow," "Gates of splendor — the Golden Gate Bridge," "sunstruck city." At last, she put down her pen, forgetting her notes.

"It's magnificent —"

She was only vaguely aware of Mark's reflected smile as he said, "Yes, that it is. One of the most beautiful cities on earth."

"Now I see why everyone raves about it —"

Suddenly they were driving down into the breathtaking city, past the towering office buildings.

"We're staying just off Union Square," Mark offered.

Amy located the hotel on her city map. "Thank goodness you know the way!"

"I've been here a few times," he commented in that understated way of his.

"So I assumed." She suspected that he was amused with her naivete. Well, she would most certainly manage. He had revealed so little about his plans, with the exception of attending the travel agents' convention, that she would simply have to find her own way around to do the research.

Minutes later they drove through scenic Union Square, surrounded by some of the world's most elegant shops, then pulled into the hotel's carriage entrance.

Uniformed attendants took charge of the car and luggage, then led them to the hotel's spacious lobby, a bastion of old-world luxury with its ivory marble floors, Oriental carpets, dark wooden columns, and potted palms.

"Tired?" Mark asked her.

"A little. But you must be exhausted after all that driving."

"Not bad. Excuse me. I'll see about our registration."

"I'd prefer to register for my own room —"

"I'll take care of it," he said firmly and started for the registration counter.

Feeling a flutter of panic, Amy sat uneasily on an antique couch next to a potted palm. If Mark's plans were unsuitable, she would simply demand a change.

She gazed about the lobby. At the far end a string quartet was playing semi-classical music in the lounge. Behind her a hallway led to the elevators, sedate shops and a dining room. It was without a doubt the most exquisite hotel she had ever seen. It would be sure to impress foreign visitors, too, affording them a glimpse of old San Francisco. She pulled out her notebook to jot down ideas for her report.

Amy gazed out at the ocean. In their bedroom Valerie had made her feelings quite clear. "Mark is different from the rest of the family, Amy — different and dangerous. He's chosen to follow another path for his life, and if you're not careful, you could get hurt."

Over the sounds of the surf, Dr. Marston continued. "Mark's a lot like I used to be."

"Like you used to be?"

He laughed at her amazement. "Believe me, there are no rebels like preacher's kids!"

"But you were a medical missionary —"

"That was after my rebellious stage, and after I married Catherine."

Amy shook her head. "It's hard to believe you were ever a rebel."

Dr. Marston smiled. "Faith can make a lot of surprising changes in a person."

"I suppose so," she replied politely, unconvinced.

Mark blasted his horn at a passing truck as it cut too closely in front of them, jarring Amy from her memories.

"Idiot!" he growled, his brow furrowing in disapproval.

His mood did not seem to be improving, she thought, returning to the brochures and articles in the manila envelope. The envelope included paperwork for the Travel Agents' Convention and Conference that Mark would be attending, and there was even a page entitled, "Spouses' Activities." Perhaps these tours would be a good way to see the city for the first time, if she was allowed to participate. The Spouses' Schedule of Events included a welcoming coffee, followed by tours of the city, Victorian homes, Filoli Gardens, Alcatraz, wine country, Chinatown, and special activities like a Chinese cooking class and a shopping excursion.

After another glimpse of Mark's obdurate expression, she decided not to inquire about the tours now; she could check on them with the Spouses' Activity Chairperson in the morning. Or perhaps she could arrange for tours on her own through the hotel. He had been so quiet since lunch that she was beginning to wonder if he was already regretting having brought her along. If she only knew more about men!

Hours later, as they approached San Francisco, Amy pulled out the area map and her notebook. Better to make too many notes than not enough, she thought, and began to record her impressions as they drove through Livermore, then the suburbs of Oakland. Traffic grew steadily heavier until they were hurtling through four lanes of cars and trucks in downtown Oakland. In the distance she spotted the twin towers of a high-arching bridge spanning an expanse of brilliant blue water.

"The Bay Bridge?"

"Yes."

"Then, according to the map, that's San Francisco Bay! It's all going too fast —"

She nodded in remembrance, her resentment fading. It would be a dreary ride if one traveled with less . . . intriguing company than Mark. "Far be it for me to interfere with . . . *family* . . . custom," she replied with an attempt at levity.

"We'll make up for it tonight at dinner." He peered into the brown sack among their luggage. "Here it is. There's even the little cutting board and an old knife. Let's buy something to drink in the station."

As they resumed the drive, Amy served lunch from the brown bag spread across her lap. There was a special warmth to the ritual of spreading cheese on wheat crackers for him, their fingers touching as she handed them to him — and later the slices of apple.

"My fingers are getting cheesy," he said, wiping his hands on a tissue. "Would you mind putting the food into my mouth?"

"Another old custom?" she inquired wryly.

"Yes, come to think of it."

"Well, here goes," Amy laughed as she fed Mark a cracker with cheese.

At first he was restrained as she placed the bits of food in his mouth, but then a sense of mischief overcame him and he pretended to nip at her fingers. She laughed at first, but his expression changed as his eyes met hers with sudden passion.

"Mark, please —"

"This is much nicer than eating in a rest stop," he said, casting an appreciative glance at her and ignoring the huge trucks roaring by.

"Eyes on the road," she said with uncertainty.

"And if I'd rather look at you?"

"Better watch the road —"

He smiled, the creases around his lips deepening far too engagingly.

He'd merely been teasing her, she decided, and it wouldn't do to take him seriously. Not now. Not with the evidence of a romantic relationship with Glynia hanging in his bathroom. This was not the Mark she had adored. Suddenly she wondered what their room arrangements might be when they arrived in San Francisco. Why hadn't she asked about them at yesterday's breakfast when he'd explained the details of her job? She cast an apprehensive look at him as he finished his lunch, realizing how quickly the old attraction had reasserted itself — even though she should be outraged by his behavior.

As if reading her mind, his mood turned somber, his angular chin slowly taking on a stubborn expression as he concentrated on his driving. Apparently the pleasant interlude was at an end. He had been friendly, had even seemed interested in her. But something had changed and he had withdrawn once again.

Amy's mind darted to her conversation with Dr. Marston yesterday.

She'd been strolling along the beach with him, and he'd said, "Val has strongly hinted that she disapproves of your going to San Francisco with Mark, but I think she has the wrong impression of him. A lot of people do."

and I drove through here once on the way to Yosemite," she said. "He used to take us camping. Have you ever done any camping?"

"With the Boy Scouts."

"Of course! I forgot you were in scouting."

He added thoughtfully, "It seems a long time ago."

"Looking at you now, it's hard to believe that you were once a — boy, let alone a Boy Scout."

He gave her an amused glance. "I'm not *that* old."

She laughed. "Actually, I didn't mean it entirely as a joke." She tried to explain. "It's just that time seems to have no meaning. What I'm trying to say is . . . recent events sometimes seem to have taken place eons ago. Yet, on the other hand, I remember moments from my childhood as if they happened yesterday." For example, she thought, the frequent dream in which she vividly relived the death of her parents. But she didn't want to dwell on the past. "Tell me about your scouting days."

Their conversation moved between childhood recollections and the scenery of the valley. Slowly Amy's distrust diminished as she pondered the stories Mark was sharing. How unlikely it seemed now that he had ever been shy among other children, or apprehensive about swimming in a river or about learning to ski. Whenever silence fell, she returned to her reading matter. It seemed a pleasant enough way to spend the morning.

It was well after lunchtime before Mark pulled off the freeway for gas at what appeared to be the world's largest rest stop. They climbed out of the car to stretch, and he slid his dark glasses up into his hair. "Hungry?" he asked, studying the fast food restaurants nearby.

"A little."

"I'm afraid none of these places looks very enticing."

"But your mother packed a lunch for us."

He grinned. "She didn't tell me."

"Apples and crackers and cheese. She said you were especially fond of apples." For some reason Amy was reminded of the biblical account of the temptation of Adam and Eve and their infamous apple, and she almost laughed aloud. Shrugging off the notion, she continued, "The bag is in the trunk."

"Would you mind eating in the car?" he asked as they went around to the back of the car. "We could save time if we drove straight through. We can eat on the way — if you'd help me."

She suspected this was not the first time Mark had traveled alone with a woman. A mental picture of the glamorous Glynia, feeding Mark a cluster of ripe grapes rose, unbidden, and Amy felt a twinge of resentment.

"It's an old family custom," he explained, unlocking the trunk, "especially when driving through the San Joaquin Valley. The valley may be an agricultural marvel, but it's not one of the garden spots of the world. If you recall, the faster the ride's over, the better."

question. "Did you pick up your secretary's reports on Los Angeles and San Diego? I thought I might read them on the way."

"They're on top of my briefcase in the back seat," Mark replied, watching the light traffic as they headed back for the freeway. "In the manila envelope. There's a folder full of tourist information on San Francisco too."

Amy unfastened her seat belt and leaned over the headrest. The manila envelope was just beyond her grasp. Well, there seemed to be no other way to retrieve it but to turn around in her seat, kneeling as best she could. Not a very ladylike position, especially in her tan dress with its straight skirt, she thought. The car swerved and she found herself thrown against Mark's shoulder, his touch jolting her like an electric shock.

"Sorry," he apologized abruptly.

She caught her breath and moved away. "It's . . . all right." Envelope in hand, she settled back into her seat. Hopefully he was unaware of his galvanizing effect on her.

Surveying the nearby traffic, she wondered why Mark had swerved. There were no cars particularly close to them, nor had he changed lanes. Had he been that intrigued with her indecorous position? Maybe she really didn't know Mark anymore. Unnerved, she refastened her seat belt.

As they merged back onto the freeway, she was grateful to have the material to occupy her mind. The reports were not terribly well written, as Mark had clearly warned. But Amy was confident of her own writing ability, so she felt no real qualms about the work ahead. Instead, the pressure she was feeling came from Mark's nearness.

After Los Angeles and its sprawl of endless suburbs disappeared behind them, they curved for miles through green and tan foothills, seemingly entering another country.

Mark turned and smiled at her. "When I'm out here," he said, "I always feel as if my responsibilities are over and I can look forward to adventure ahead."

"What sort of adventure?" she inquired a trifle warily.

He darted an odd glance at her. "Travel is an adventure. Don't you agree?"

"I'm afraid I haven't traveled enough to know," she retorted and turned to the reports again. Why on earth was she letting him get under her skin? Why couldn't she forget things that were none of her business — things like Glynia's nightgown hanging on his bathroom door?

Before long, they were descending into the San Joaquin Valley, a flat land filled with rectangular green fields of irrigated alfalfa, tomatoes, cotton, and crops neither of them could identify. Occasional palo verde trees and tamarisks grew at the roadsides, and, here and there, windbreaks of eucalyptus trees swayed over distant farmhouses.

Amy decided to interrupt the uncomfortable silence. "Gramp, Valerie,

modern paintings, heavily daubed with yellow and orange oil paints.

"What do you think?" Mark inquired.

"The plants are lovely —"

He chuckled. "I take it you're not wild about the decor."

"It's just that it's such a contrast to the antiques in your parents' house —"

"The furniture belongs to the owners," he explained, "but the place has been ideal for me. And within walking distance of my office." He eyed the furnishings critically. "The space-age decor has been an interesting change, but in the words of the old cliché, 'It's a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live here.' "

She felt strangely relieved. She too preferred rooms that looked warm and inviting — more hospitable.

He opened the draperies, and she was stunned by the view of the city and distant foothills through the sparkling floor-to-ceiling windows. "What a magnificent view of Los Angeles!"

He smiled. "That's what I enjoy most too. Now, if you'll excuse me —" He headed for the adjoining den to use the telephone. "The bath is down the hallway," he said, "and there's instant coffee in the kitchen cabinet over the microwave."

"May I make some for you?" Amy asked, but he had already disappeared into the next room.

"No, thanks," he called out. She could hear the staccato sound of digits being dialed on the touchtone phone.

She found her way to the bathroom. Now was a good time to use the facilities; the drive to San Francisco would take most of the day.

The bathroom was no less modernistic, with its enormous white marble tub and Jacuzzi. A wall-to-wall mirror reflected the browns and white of the room, the monotony relieved only by a dish of lemon yellow soaps. How utterly unhappy she would be to live in such a stark place, she thought. As she brushed her hair, she noted another color: green. A filmy nightgown of jade green was hanging on a hook behind the bathroom door.

Appalled, yet fascinated, she felt herself drawn to examine the gown. Embroidered in exquisite letters on one side of the deeply plunging bodice it said: Glynia.

Oh, Mark! Amy's heart cried out. *So it is true! I didn't believe . . . I thought you were different. Why couldn't you be — special?*

As they drove away from the condo, Mark donned his sunglasses. Behind them, he could assume any guise he chose. There was no way to read his true emotions. Suddenly Amy felt completely out of his league. It was obvious that he traveled the fast lane, where the so-called sophisticates sped through life. She felt unexpectedly angry.

After a long silence he asked, "Anything wrong?"

How transparent she must be, she thought, and carefully ignored his

Mark's apartment. A phrase from an old nursery rhyme hovered disconcertingly: *"Step into my parlor, said the spider to the fly."*

Last night during her date with Rob, she hadn't been able to summon the courage to tell him she was going to San Francisco until they pulled into the Marstons' driveway.

"You mean you're really going with that guy?" Rob had asked incredulously.

A bubble of laughter escaped her. "Yes, of course. I'm not going alone."

It was obvious that he didn't find her amusing as he turned off the motor and frowned into the darkness. "I suppose there's nothing I can say to make you change your mind?"

"No, Rob — I've already given my word."

He opened his car door angrily, but at the Marstons' front door his mood softened. "Amy —," he whispered pulling her into his arms, "— please don't go. Please take my word for it — Mark Marston is a —"

"But I've promised," she interrupted. "I've known Mark practically all my life. Besides, this is strictly business."

"I hope so," he yielded with a note of helplessness. As his head inclined toward hers, she ducked, causing his kiss to land awkwardly somewhere in the vicinity of her left ear. But he held her an instant longer before moving away. "I hope so."

Amy's thoughts returned to the present, and she glanced uneasily at Mark, then out the car window.

Sunday morning traffic was light on the San Diego Freeway, even in the outskirts of Los Angeles. Mark took the Santa Monica Boulevard off-ramp and drove beyond Century City before pulling up beside a tall tan stucco building, a "skyscraper" by West Los Angeles standards.

"I'm impressed," she said as he helped her out of the car. "I didn't expect anything quite so elegant."

"Oh, I'm only leasing, piling up a lot of useless rent receipts."

Exactly what she'd soon be doing, Amy thought with a pang of regret.

Inside, only a few people wandered through the small marble lobby. Mark and Amy took the elevator to the top floor. Stepping out into the posh corridor, she noted a swimming pool, artfully landscaped with potted trees, shrubs, and flowers.

"You didn't tell me you had the penthouse!"

"Albeit leased," he reminded her. "The owners should be back from Europe midweek. Fortunately they're letting me store some of my things here until I can find somewhere else to live."

As he unlocked the condo's shimmering stainless steel double doors, Amy couldn't help imagining that they were entering an expensive vault. Something within her recoiled at the cold austerity of the ultra-modern entry. The living room was a vast expanse of brown carpeting, white leather couches and chairs, dangling silver mobiles, and outrageously

3

On Sunday morning the whole Marston clan, including Valerie, gathered to see Amy and Mark off to San Francisco. There was a last-minute flurry of hugs and kisses and promises to keep each other posted.

"Whew!" Mark sighed, nosing the blue BMW northward. "You'd think we were leaving forever."

"In a sense, we are, I suppose," Amy mused as she gave a final wave. "Maybe that's why the rite of waving good-by has lasted through the years. We never know if we'll see the others again or, if we do, how all of us might have changed in the meantime."

He turned a wry grin on her. "The poet speaketh."

"Guess I've done it again," she laughed.

More important at the moment, she thought, "the poet" was grateful to be getting away. Yesterday hadn't been easy. The pressure had mounted with Valerie's warnings about Mark's sophistication, his reputation with women. Rob, who had taken her out last night for a hamburger and a movie, had echoed Valerie's concern. And Glynia, who had spent most of yesterday with Mark, had glared at her furiously.

Mark asked, "Mind if I turn on the radio?"

"No — not at all," she murmured, feeling suddenly aware of Mark's masculinity, so close now within the compact car.

Moments later, soft music swirling from the radio heightened the aura of intimate proximity. Directing a hasty glance at him, she decided that it must be her imagination, that he had no special motive for choosing romantic music. Indeed, Mark's attention seemed riveted on the road ahead.

They ventured a few tentative remarks about the possibility of rain, then shifted to a discussion of the scenery and occasional bits of news from the radio. As they passed the university district, Amy pointed out the new apartment building in which she would live after the wedding, and Mark mentioned that it was very near the church his grandfather had pastored.

Halfway to Los Angeles he said, "I have to stop at the condo to pick up my secretary's reports and gather some other things together. You can freshen up there if you'd like."

Amy nodded. She *was* curious to see how he lived, though she knew Rob would be appalled if he knew she was contemplating a visit to

He gave an odd chuckle. "I think I'm jealous."

"Why should you be?" She hoped he understood what she was implying: *that she was not committed to him or to anyone else, nor did she want to be!*

Despite the impression she had tried to convey, when they arrived at his car he attempted to draw her into his arms.

"No, Rob, please —"

He backed away reluctantly, brows furrowed with confusion in the dim driveway lighting, then climbed into his brown Mustang. "See you tomorrow?" he asked hopefully.

"I don't know what the Marstons have planned yet."

"I'll phone." He turned the key in the ignition, still searching her face.

"Fine."

She watched Rob back his car out of the driveway, suddenly realizing that she should have mentioned his daisies again, but he was already edging into the street, the car's headlights piercing the grayness of the night. In its beam, she noted that Val had parked Gramp's old blue Chevy to the side of the Marstons' garage.

On the patio she found Mark waiting to lock the gate, apparently having seen Glynia home along the beach. It seemed a long moment while they gazed at each other through the billowing fog. "I hope you'll go with me to San Francisco," he urged in his rich baritone.

"I don't know —" She wanted to go! Oh, how she wanted to! Yet perhaps it was better to play it safe.

"We haven't discussed your pay," Mark continued. When he named the amount, she was astounded. The sum was as unreal as the fog swirling around them. That much for exploring a city and writing a report on it? She could certainly use the financial help. The probate attorney said it would be a long time before Gramp's estate was settled, and that there would not be much left after taxes, fees, and medical bills. There was little to occupy her time in Santa Rosita now since her part in the wedding plans was completed. Moreover, she truly wanted to see San Francisco.

"Thank you, Mark," she found herself saying, "I think I'll take you up on your offer." She wasn't sure whether her reply was prompted by the money . . . by the spell of the evening . . . or by her endless attraction to him.

"Fine. Good-night then . . . Amy." His voice caressed her name. It was as if he had called her *dear* or *darling* for the first time.

"Yes . . . good-night." She turned away abruptly and hurried into the house, scarcely seeing Rob's daisies as she fled through the kitchen, then upstairs to the sanctuary of her room.

she felt reluctant to pull it away. The next moment Mark and Glynia stepped onto the patio, Mark's eyes taking in the cozy twosome. He quickly turned away, seating Glynia and taking the chair opposite her. Amy took the opportunity to withdraw her hand from Rob's, hoping no one would conclude that there was any kind of commitment between them.

The voices blended harmoniously to the rousing strains of "Michael Rowed the Boat Ashore" and "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing." Then Catherine chose "Evergreen," dedicating it to Valerie and Thom, humming the haunting melody until she had quieted the singers and there was not another sound except the mellow strings and her voice. When the poignant words of love filled the night air, Amy felt such an aching in her heart that her eyes stung with tears. Feeling Mark's gaze upon her, she quickly looked out at the approaching fog that crept over the ocean, blotting out the stars overhead. It was as if they alone had floated away to sea, as if all of them had embarked on an ethereal dream.

" 'Now the day is over,' " Catherine sang into the stillness, " 'night is drawing nigh, shadows of the evening steal across the sky.' " A brass lantern glimmered just behind her, softly silhouetting her lovely profile. " 'Jesus, give the weary calm and sweet repose, with Thy tenderest blessing, may mine eyelids close.' " It was obvious that she was no longer singing for them, but singing to God like a loving child, her voice full of trust and joy. " 'Through the long night watches, may Thine angels spread their white wings over me, watching round my bed . . . When the morning wakens, then may I arise, pure and fresh and sinless in Thy holy eyes.' "

Her soft and lingering "Amen" hung in the air, and Amy knew that it was not just to hear Catherine's voice that the others begged her to sing, but to glimpse her wondrous faith. It occurred to her that if she had such faith herself, she wouldn't be wallowing about in indecision; she would be asking God for answers. And perhaps she would have Catherine's inner joy. She recalled that the older woman had once said, "Joy is the song of love that God plants in one's heart."

After a while Catherine sighed. "Bedtime for us."

Rob rose with them. "Thank you for a delicious dinner and a beautiful evening." His words were heartfelt. "I don't know when I've enjoyed myself more."

Dr. Marston shook his hand. "Our pleasure."

Joining her husband, Catherine added, "Yes, Rob, we hope you'll come again," before they bade everyone a good-night and made their way inside.

"Guess I'd better head home too," Rob decided. "I'm tired after that trip."

As Amy walked with him out to his car, he asked, "Are they always like that . . . so loving?"

"Dr. and Mrs. Marston, always," she replied, but her thoughts ran on. *Mark is another matter.* "They're a very special family."

despite the anger that often ignited him now. Besides, it had all happened when Mark was working in New York. How could people here pretend to know?

"Mark Marston's type takes advantage of women — especially innocent ones," Rob persevered. "I suppose someone like Glynia could handle it, but I don't think you should go with him."

"I appreciate your concern, Rob," she said more stiffly than she had intended, "but I'm going to have to make my own decision." She only hoped that her decision would be the right one. There had been too many disappointments in her life already, too many cloudbanks obscuring the sunsets.

When they returned to the patio, Catherine and James Marston were sitting on the swing, enjoying the evening. In the descending darkness, the old brass lanterns on the low wall glimmered softly, imparting such a nautical air to the patio that it seemed they had stepped onto the deck of a ship at the edge of the sea.

"Did you have a nice walk?" Dr. Marston asked.

"Yes, thank you," Rob replied, sending a bright flush to Amy's cheeks.

"Very nice," Amy added nervously, although it wasn't quite true. The walk — and Rob's declaration and kiss — had only added to her confusion.

Catherine glanced out toward the ocean. "Here come Mark and Glynia."

Amy watched the two of them drag the small sailboat along the sand to the edge of her parents' patio. Minutes later, an outdoor floodlight illuminated the impressive Bennington house of wood and glass. Glynia's mother and stepfather were visiting in the south of France for the month and would stop on their return in Virginia to attend Valerie's and Thom's wedding. What had brought Glynia from New York to an empty house? Amy wondered. Mark's presence in Santa Rosita? And if so, why was it any concern of hers?

As Amy and Rob settled on the couch, the French doors opened and Valerie carried out a guitar. "I was feeling so lonely that I hoped you'd sing for us," she said to Catherine. "It would remind me of the nights Thom and I have spent here with you."

"We haven't sung together in a long time," her husband added. "It's just the night for it."

Catherine patted his arm and took the guitar to the chaise longue. Sitting down, she ran her fingers lightly over the strings, then twiddled one of the tuning pegs. "There. That's a little better. Any requests?"

Valerie suggested, "How about *Greensleeves?* That seems to suit the evening."

Catherine sat back thoughtfully, then began strumming, her melodious contralto voice blending with the chords of the guitar and the deep symphonic chorus of the sea. " 'Alas, my love, you do me wrong, to cast me off . . .' "

As they all joined in the refrain, Rob caught Amy's hand in his. Again,

I didn't either! she thought. All through her teen years she had only imagined what it might be like to be kissed by a real man. There had been only a few sloppy kisses at parties, delivered inexpertly from boys rejected by the slender, pretty girls. It was different with Rob, whose hands still gripped her shoulders, whose brown eyes revealed that he meant to kiss her again.

Once more, his familiar face tilted down toward hers, his eyes closing, his lips poised above hers. Over his shoulder, a bright object bobbing in the swelling ocean caught Amy's attention. It was Mark and Glynia in the sailboat!

Amy pressed both hands firmly against Rob's chest. The sailboat was precisely where she and Mark had treaded water this afternoon, a good distance away. Nevertheless, she felt certain they were watching.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Rob asked.

She shook her head helplessly.

"Amy —?" His voice was full of confusion, compounding her own.

"Oh, Rob, I don't know —"

"But, I thought . . . you seemed to . . ." Sensing her dilemma, Rob drew a deep breath. "Surely this wasn't your first kiss, Amy."

"Not exactly . . ." How embarrassing that he should think so. Couldn't she do anything right where men were concerned?

He looked momentarily relieved. "I don't want to rush you," he said, apparently still unaware of the sailboat on the horizon. "Maybe we should start back."

"Yes, we'd better."

She wanted to extract her hand from his as they strolled back along the beach, but it would seem odd after having returned his kiss with such wild abandon. Looking out at the ocean, she realized that Mark and Glynia were sailing in to shore, and that the sunset was a disappointment. A typical May cloudbank had rolled in, shrouding the promise of a wondrously hued sky. Without fanfare, the sun slid out of sight.

They walked along silently, absorbed in their own thoughts. As they approached the Marston house in the last lingering rays of light, Rob said, "I care about you very much, Amy, and I'm awfully concerned about your being with Mark. Just the thought of you two going to San Francisco alone worries me sick. You know his reputation."

She eased her hand from Rob's, but he continued undaunted. "Women throw themselves at him. Everyone talks about it. You know about that girl, Erika —"

"But that wasn't his fault," Amy responded, dismissing doubts that flickered in the deepest recesses of her mind.

"How do you know?"

She shrugged. He would probably have a difficult time believing her if she told him that Catherine — Mark's mother! — had explained what had happened. Nor would Rob understand her belief that Mark was a fine man,

"Thanks. Excuse us then," Rob said, rising from his chair.

Amy saw no other course than to accompany him. In any event, it was a beautiful evening, and cerise-stained clouds near the horizon promised a magnificent sunset.

She and Rob walked over the sandy hillside and down toward the ocean. Trying to forget the unsettling issues before her, she gazed out at the bright blue Pacific. Great waves gathered in the distance and roared in upon the beach, crashing and rushing toward them, only to foam into pearly patterns in the sand at their feet. Catherine had said the ocean always had a calming effect on her. Now, however, it seemed to reflect the turbulence of Amy's thoughts.

They wandered along the beach in silence for a time before Rob ventured, "I hope you don't mind my not asking you first about a walk . . . but I was afraid you'd refuse."

"Why would I?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's because everything seems so different now that you're staying here. I'm not always the most tactful person either. I suffer from what your grandfather called 'foot in the mouth disease.' "

She smiled wryly. "I suppose you're going to issue a warning about my going to San Francisco."

"Not very subtle, am I?"

"It's just that I'm not sure I understand your concern."

"No, I suppose you don't." They strolled quietly on past the other beach houses, then beside the rugged cliffs, listening to the ocean. After a while he began nervously, "I don't know quite how to tell you that — that I've grown to like you very much, Amy —"

She had not expected any kind of a declaration, nor had she ever seen such a vulnerable look on Rob's face. "I like you, too, Rob. But —"

"I know we've always been more like brother and sister, living next door to each other, but lately I've come to feel differently about you."

No! I don't want to hear this now! she wanted to say, but then it was too late and his arm was around her, turning her to him in the warm evening breeze.

"Oh, Amy!" he whispered hoarsely against the ocean's persistent roar.

She was aware only of spreading streaks of pink and orange as the sun began its descent into the sea, then she closed her eyes, and his lips met hers. She knew she should pull away, but something in her yearned so desperately to be held, to be kissed, that she found herself yielding.

His mouth was soft at first, hesitant, then sweetly demanding, and she found herself slipping her arms around his neck and her lips responding with such an amazing surge of passion that the brilliant colors of the sunstruck clouds seemed to blaze through her.

Rob pulled away, catching his breath. "I had no idea you'd feel this way too."

"I'm serious, Amy."

She nodded, more to silence him than anything else.

To her left, Mark and Glynia were engaged in rapt conversation about Glynia's latest modeling job, though Glynia's attention strayed for an instant, her jade eyes narrowing in Amy's direction.

As if aware that he had spoken out of turn, Rob said, "It's going to be strange not to have you living next door."

"I know. I'm still wondering if I'll ever adjust to an apartment after living in Gramp's house most of my life," she said casually, more and more bewildered by Rob's attitude. She bit into her herb bread, turning to listen to the others as they spoke of more familiar things — the weather, the upcoming county elections, the national news. To her relief, nothing more was said about moving, nor about Mark's invitation for her to accompany him to San Francisco.

After dinner, Amy insisted on clearing the table, partly to give herself time alone to consider Mark's offer. Yet, as she placed the dirty dishes and silverware in the dishwasher, her mind played tricks on her. How could she make a decision if she couldn't even sort out the pros and cons of the matter? Gradually she calmed herself enough to think clearly.

Rob's disapproval had been evident and, undoubtedly, others would consider it improper for her to travel with a man. Valerie, for one. Yet the trip sounded so perfect for her — just what she needed after the long months of caring for Gramp, and it would challenge her writing skills. Both the negative and positive aspects of the decision whirled through her head. If it were any other man but Mark. . . . At last the kitchen was spotless, with only the copper pot full of spaghetti cooling on the stove, and there were no more excuses to remain inside.

At that moment Catherine stepped in through the French doors. "I thought we'd have lemon sherbet and chocolate chip cookies for dessert," she said, starting for the enormous stainless steel refrigerator-freezer that was often used for her catering jobs. "Didn't I promise family fare?"

"There's something very comforting about spaghetti and chocolate chip cookies," Amy agreed. "Let me help." Good. A little more time would be gained to delay the decision about San Francisco, which was still circling elusively in her mind — and to avoid the confrontation with Rob.

Carrying out the dessert, Amy felt a pang of dismay to see that Mark and Glynia had changed into swimsuits and were dragging her parents' small sailboat across the beach. While the rest of them devoured sherbet and cookies, Mark and Glynia sailed away, the bright red and white sail billowing.

After dessert Valerie excused herself, and Rob asked the Marstons, "Would you mind if Amy and I took a walk along the beach?"

"Certainly not. Go right ahead," Dr. Marston replied with a curious look at them. "Catherine and I usually stroll after dinner ourselves."

"Perhaps you can hire someone after you get there, dear," Catherine soothed.

"I'd prefer using someone from out of town — someone who could see the city through the eyes of a first-time tourist."

"How about taking Amy?" Dr. Marston suggested. "She enjoys writing. She might be just the person who could see San Francisco from a foreign tourist's point of view."

Mark turned to her. "Actually, I considered asking you at the beach this afternoon. Would you be interested?"

Amy felt her eyes widen in surprise. "I — I don't know. I've never been to San Francisco."

"All the better," he replied. "I need a research assistant who can view the city from a fresh perspective."

Everyone at the table shifted their attention to her. She noted Glynia's disapproval, Valerie's silence, Rob's frown.

Turning to Mark, she asked, "What would I be expected to do?"

"Scout out locations with special appeal for foreign clients of American Holidays. Find problems that might confront them — and suggest solutions. Then prepare a written report so we can compile an itinerary of the most important tourist attractions. My secretary has already finished reports on L.A. and San Diego. You could use them as guides, although they could stand some improvement. She's a good secretary, but not the world's best writer."

The trip sounded intriguing, and writing, of course, had always been a passion with her, though she supposed she would have to bone up on the art of writing reports on travel. Certainly Mark intended this trip as nothing more than a business proposition, or he wouldn't have mentioned it in front of his family and Glynia. Besides, it had been his father's idea. But for some reason, she had a reservation.

"Thank you, Mark, for your confidence in me, but I'd like some time to think about it."

"Fine, but I'll have to know soon. You'd be paid a research fee and expenses, of course. We can discuss that later, if you're interested."

She nodded, relieved when the conversation drifted to other topics. The offer sounded almost too good to be true — being paid to see San Francisco, considered by many to be the most beautiful city in the United States. And with Mark! Years ago she would have leaped at the chance, but so much had happened since those carefree days. They had both changed. In just this one day, Amy had witnessed so many different facets of his personality.

Carefully winding spaghetti on her fork, she realized that Rob was watching her. She turned to smile at him, but his expression remained somber as he leaned toward her.

"I want to talk to you before you decide."

She was so amazed at his presumption that she could think of no reply.

As Mark shook hands with his father, Amy noted again the strong resemblance between the two men — the same sapphire blue eyes, straight patrician noses, high cheekbones and angular chins. Even the same narrow sensuous lips and the deep creases beside them when they smiled. Dr. Marston's hair, however, was predominantly gray, and he was not quite as tall as Mark. It occurred to her that Mark would look like his father when he neared sixty, and that he would still be a very handsome man.

Catherine announced, "And now if I can coax all of you to the table —"

Later, seated between Mark and Rob, Amy was disconcerted when everyone joined hands to pray. At home, grace was never said at meals, and despite her Sunday school experience as a child, she was not sure she believed in God. Those long-ago lessons of a loving Father seemed irrelevant for these harsh times. Moreover, it was peculiar to be holding Mark's and Rob's hands in this fashion. She listened, uncertain of the words.

For all the glory of Thy way . . .

To her right, Rob was silent; nor did she hear Mark or Glynia praying.

For Thy protection night and day . . .

Dr. Marston's voice rang clear and strong, as did Catherine's and Valerie's. Since her sister had begun attending church again this year, Amy had noticed an unusual change in her. Or perhaps it was just because Thom was a believer. He was, after all, the son of Catherine and James Marston — former medical missionaries — and the grandson of the late Dr. James Marston, Sr. — once pastor of the largest congregation in Santa Rosita.

For roof, tree, fire, and bread and board,
For friends and home, we thank Thee, Lord. Amen.

As they dropped their hands, Amy glanced at Mark. He looked embarrassed, uncomfortable. She supposed he was no longer a believer, or maybe he was just outright angry with God. She couldn't really blame him; she was angry herself. If God existed, why had Erika thoughtlessly done something that would affect Mark for the rest of his life? And why had Amy's own parents been killed by that drunken driver? And why had Gramp suffered so before he died of cancer? It all seemed grossly unfair.

"Your salad," Rob said, passing it to her.

Jarred from her thoughts, she thanked him and noticed that Val was serving salad while Catherine filled plates with spaghetti. Reaching for the basket of herb bread, Amy started it around the table, then the bowl of grated cheese. She forced the anger from her mind and tried to focus on the lovely setting and the pleasant ocean breeze. There probably wasn't a lovelier place to be dining in all of Southern California — or anywhere else, for that matter.

During dinner, the conversation turned to Mark's trip to San Francisco on Monday and the news that his secretary's husband was being transferred and she had given notice that she would be leaving her position at American Holidays, Inc. "I'd counted on her to do some research for me in San Francisco next week," he said with disappointment.

had your evening chat."

Valerie beamed. "Happy. Almost as happy as I am. Just sixteen more days until the wedding!"

"My little brother is a fortunate fellow," Mark said with a smile.

Glynia turned a petulant look on Mark. "I never expected to hear those words coming from you! I thought you didn't believe in marriage."

With a smooth push of his tan loafers, Mark set the swing in motion, his color deepening faintly. "Only in special cases, like this one." He smiled at a thought and turned to Valerie. "I can already imagine the two of you taking Washington by storm — Thom, with his brilliance; and you, with your beauty and sweetness."

"Now Mark —," Valerie objected, obviously pleased, while Amy reflected upon Glynia's comment. Evidently Mark didn't believe in marriage, or so he had told Glynia. If she had designs on him, nothing had come of it — at least not yet. There was something about Glynia — her glamour perhaps — that made her seem an unlikely partner for a lifelong commitment.

Later, Dr. Marston stepped out on the patio with his arm around Catherine's trim waist. "I see we have the four most beautiful girls in the world assembled here."

Catherine smiled wryly and shook her head at her husband. "Why do I always invite the beautiful ones?"

"Because you adore me?" he inquired with a grin.

She nudged him gently with her elbow. "Because I trust you," she returned, and he laughingly kissed the top of her head.

It was always a pleasure to see the two of them together, Amy thought. They radiated love. But there was something more. It was as though they had embarked together upon an adventure through life, no matter where it took them. Certainly Mark must agree that his parents modeled the best that marriage could be.

Dr. Marston turned to kiss Valerie's cheek, then stepped over to Amy. "What a pleasure to have you here." The glow of welcome in his blue eyes was confirmed by a fatherly hug.

Amy's vision blurred and for an instant she wished he were really her father and that this house was more than a temporary stopping place in her life. "Thank you for — for inviting me too." Soon this day would be over, she reminded herself, firmly gaining control of her frayed emotions. Years from now she would recall it as the day she took her first step into the future, and that the Marstons had eased the transition for her.

" 'Our tent is your tent,' or whatever the old adage is," he replied lightly.

"Tent —?" She smiled at his understated description of the magnificent ocean-front house full of family heirlooms. "It's scarcely a tent, Dr. Marston." For some reason, while Amy had always felt comfortable calling his wife by her first name, she had never been able to call him "James." It was always "Dr. Marston," the eminent surgeon.

"Well —" Glynia stretched, her green eyes gleaming, catlike. "I didn't know you two were an item."

"Yes —," Rob began.

"We're just old friends," Amy objected.

Mark interrupted them with a sweep of his hand. "Sit down and make yourselves comfortable."

Rob ignored the invitation. "I thought you were living in L.A.," he said with a slight edge to his voice.

Mark quirked an eyebrow. "Not at the moment. My plans have changed."

Amy settled uneasily on a nearby rattan couch, perching on the salmon terrycloth cushions, and was grateful to find Rob following her lead.

After a moment Rob remarked, "Nice view."

"Lovely," Amy agreed. Discomfited by the interchange between the men, she tried to focus on the sea gulls wheeling against the blue sky. The ocean breeze rustled palm fronds above their heads, and beyond them, the white-crested waves rushed onto the beach.

Glynia continued her hushed conversation with Mark as if no one else were present. Amy recalled having heard that if one spoke very softly, the audience would draw nearer. She herself had never tested the theory, but then she had never been very clever about playing games with men; in any event Glynia's seductive murmur had completely captured Mark's attention.

Rob turned to Amy. As if taking his cue from Glynia, he lowered his voice. "I mentioned to Mom that you might like to stay with us until your apartment is available."

"With you? But I'm fine here —"

"Unfortunately we have just the two bedrooms at home," he continued, "but we can work it out."

"But, Rob, we're fine. Really!"

"I hope so." He glanced at Mark and Glynia before he continued, "If things don't work out here, you can use my room. I'll sleep on the living room couch."

She caught herself blinking hard, then trying to hide her astonishment. "I appreciate your concern, but there's no need —" What on earth was going on in Rob's head? And why did he think things wouldn't work out with the Marstons?

Valerie stepped out onto the patio, carrying a glass container of grated cheese and the small wooden salad bowls. "How nice to see you, Rob." She smiled at him, then at Mark and Glynia with whom she had apparently spoken earlier. After placing the cheese and the salad bowls on the table, Valerie chose a rattan chair between the swing and the couch, her golden presence melding the two couples into a companionable group. Amy felt a rush of love for her sister. How serene she had become lately.

Mark looked at her appreciatively. "And how is Thom? I take it you've

engagement to Thom. Yet recently he had begun asking Amy out — first to a community concert, then for a day at the zoo in San Diego, and last week to attend a dinner party at his boss's home. But he had never so much as tried to hold her hand. He was merely an old friend — the boy next door. He even looked the part, with his light brown hair and brown spaniel eyes.

Now those eyes glowed from beneath nice bushy brows. "I remembered that you like daisies."

"Yes — thank you." It occurred to her that Valerie might have suggested Rob show up, but she quickly dismissed the notion. Surely Val wouldn't go *that* far.

"Daisies seem just right for you," Rob was saying.

Amy smiled ruefully. "I suppose they do. If women could be characterized by flowers, Valerie would be a white gardenia, Catherine a . . . yellow rose . . . and I'd be a daisy."

His color deepened. "But that's not what I meant!"

"Oh, I love daisies!" she insisted hastily. Why, oh, why didn't she ever think before she spoke!

Across the work counter Catherine stirred the bubbling spaghetti sauce. "You two go out on the patio, and I'll finish the herb bread."

Amy protested, "But I haven't helped at all with dinner —"

"Nonsense, you always do more than your share. Besides, dear, you're supposed to be relaxing." She turned to Rob. "We'd be pleased if you'd join us for dinner. It's only spaghetti, but enough for an army. I scarcely know how to cook for a small group anymore."

He looked delighted. "Thanks, I'd like to — if you're sure it's no bother."

"It's no bother at all," Catherine insisted. "Now, outside with you two!"

As Amy and Rob stepped out onto the patio through the French doors, she shook her head. "They're going to spoil me."

"Good. You could use a little spoiling. You've had a pretty hard time — with your grandfather and all."

When Amy glanced at Rob, she found his expression quite serious. Flustered, she blurted, "Since when have *you* cared?"

"Since I took a good look at you, I suppose. You're really a very pretty girl, Amy, and pretty girls shouldn't have worry lines on their foreheads."

A very pretty girl? She wondered if he found her as attractive as Valerie. But Amy was distracted from her thoughts by the stunning realization that Mark and Glynia were seated on the patio swing and had obviously overheard Rob's last comment. Although she was certain that her face was bright red, Amy pressed on. "I think you both know Rob Brockaw."

Mark had changed into tan slacks and a royal-blue knit shirt, open at the neck. He rose to shake the younger man's hand, the creases near his lips deepening as he smiled. "Haven't seen you in years, Rob," he said, his eyes shifting to regard Amy curiously.

When Amy hurried downstairs later, wearing the turquoise sundress, her hair was still damp despite blowdrying. She brushed back the tendrils that had curled about her face and headed for the patio, finding Valerie and Catherine Marston conversing in low tones.

Catherine's face turned a bit pink. "There you are, Amy." Her slightly guilty tone of voice suggested that Amy had been the topic of their conversation. No doubt they were discussing her future.

Well, she would survive on her own, Amy told herself, raising her chin with determination. In any event, there was no choice in the matter. She attempted an independent air as she said, "I decided I didn't want my hair braided after all, Val," then quickly added, "What can I do to help with dinner?" The patio table was already set with the salmon-colored place mats and napkins Valerie had sewn for the Marstons to match the rim of their stoneware dishes.

"You could spread the herb butter on the bread slices —," Catherine began, but was interrupted by the ringing of the front doorbell. "Now who could that be?"

"Uh, I think I'll call Thom," Val said as she glanced at her watch. "It's after nine in Princeton."

For a split second, from the way Catherine and Valerie were acting, Amy suspected a conspiracy of some sort. *Oh, Amy!* she moaned inwardly. *Won't you ever stop writing scripts for daydreams?* Her active imagination was working overtime again.

She followed them into the spacious beam-ceilinged kitchen with its island work center, over which hung a vast array of gleaming copper pots and pans and other utensils. The mingled aromas of garlic, onions, herbs, and tomatoes wafted from a huge copper pot in which the spaghetti sauce simmered.

While Catherine went to the door and Valerie to the den to call Thom, Amy settled at one of the tall barstools at the work center and began to spread herb butter on the French bread slices.

She could hear Catherine chatting with the unexpected guest as they came down the hallway. "Look who's here to see you, Amy."

"Rob." Amy hardly knew what to say. Rob Brockaw had been in meetings in the Midwest all week, representing the research company for which he worked.

"Hi." He appeared ill at ease but thrust a green foil-wrapped pot of white and yellow daisies in her hands. "These are for you. I tried to fly back early from the conference to help you with your move, but I couldn't get away."

"Thanks, Rob. How thoughtful of you." She accepted the pot of daisies, burying her face in their wild fragrance.

Odd that he would visit her here when he scarcely knew the Marstons. In the many years Rob and his family had lived next door to Gramp's house, he had all but ignored her. Like so many of their friends, he was Valerie's age and had fancied himself in love with her sister until she announced her

2

Hurrying across the patio, Amy decided that she especially wanted to avoid Catherine Marston. The woman knew her too well not to notice that something was amiss. She detoured past the kitchen and family room, taking a roundabout way through a wrought-iron gate to the courtyard and then up the inner courtyard stairs.

As she dashed into the bedroom, Valerie turned, her hazel eyes wide with surprise. "Oh, Amy, I wish you didn't burst around so."

"Sorry. It's just that I'm pressed for time."

Valerie, lovely in her white eyelet sundress, shook her head hopelessly, her sleek honey-blond curls not quite brushing tanned shoulders. "You're still in your swimsuit, and it's almost time for dinner!"

"Well, there's nothing I can do about it now. I have to shower and wash my hair." She should have turned down the swim with Mark . . . but his offer had been irresistible.

"You'll never get your hair dry."

"I hoped you might braid it for me —"

"But I was just going down to help." Valerie cut her protest short, and let out a soft breath, smiling indulgently. "Well, all right, although I don't know how you're going to take care of all that hair when I'm gone."

"Thanks, Val." Amy didn't know how she would take care of a great number of things alone, but she didn't want to consider that now. As for her sister's less-than-subtle campaign to persuade Amy to have her hair cut to a more manageable length, she was determined not to give in. It seemed that she had always capitulated in everything else. Besides, during her years on the high school swimming team, she'd had to keep her hair shorter than most boys', and she was enjoying the feeling of femininity her luxuriant long hair gave her.

"I laid out your turquoise sundress," Valerie was saying.

"Thanks." Amy hurried to the adjoining bathroom before she said something she'd regret. The dress was exactly right for dinner on the patio, of course, but she would have preferred to have chosen it herself. There would be a thousand reasons to miss Valerie soon, yet one blessing too: in her role as older sister, Valerie was always ever-so-sweetly dictating Amy's life.

color tones of her dress, and another necklace, a cord with a clawlike pendant, hung over the angular ruff of the strapless bodice.

Glynia smiled indulgently at Mark and caught his arm lightly in hers. For a long moment their eyes held, hers dancing with secrets.

So that's what's going on in Mark's personal life, Amy thought as she hurried toward the patio. It was becoming abundantly clear that the sooner she forgot her childhood crush, the better.

Mark called out something behind her, but it was impossible to hear above the ocean's roar.

"I have to wash my hair!" she shouted in reply and ran on, her feet sinking into the dry sand on the incline to the house. No doubt he was making some excuse for joining Glynia. Well, Amy fumed, *she* certainly had no intention of coming unhinged over him, of doing something rash like that other girl — like Erika.

Despite her fear, she had plunged in again to please him. From that day forward she had been intent upon becoming an expert swimmer. Year after year she had worked toward that goal, always with the thought of pleasing Mark in the back of her mind until, one brutal day, she realized she was much too young for him. There were other girls, older and wiser than she — girls his own age. Then the girls were becoming women — beautiful, sleek, worldly women — who knew just how to please Mark. And she was still Amy — chubby little Amy Curtis — who could merely outswim anybody in her junior high class.

When she circled back to the place where Mark was treading water, he eyed her quizzically. But if he had been about to ask a question, he had apparently changed his mind. "We'd better start back."

"Race you to the beach?"

His boyish expression might have belonged to that sixteen-year-old so long ago. "You're on!"

She turned and stroked hard through the water, positioning herself to catch a great wave, then body-surfed to the shore. Regrettably, Mark was a good three lengths ahead of her. Splashing toward the beach just behind him, she noticed him waving to someone on the beach in front of the house.

Following his gaze, her spirits sank. Glynia! Even from this distance there was no mistaking the well-known model who wore outlandishly chic clothing and the vulnerable face of a child. She was dressed in a red and black Indian-print sundress, its handkerchief hemline dipping below one knee and rising to the middle of a lovely thigh. Her incredible mane of black hair curled wildly about her head, and her widespread eyes imparted the incongruous appearance of innocence.

"Are you joining us for dinner after all?" Mark asked her.

Glynia's voice was low and sultry. "I thought I might, since you invited me so sweetly on the way from the airport."

So he *had* picked her up at the airport, Amy thought as she approached them. "Hello, Glynia," she said, mustering a smile.

Glynia nodded slightly, but her jade green eyes registered no recognition. It was possible that the lovely model didn't remember her from their few brief encounters at the Marston home. Like Mark, Glynia was eight years older, and had undoubtedly regarded her only as one of the Curtis sisters — the plump one — who often visited the Marstons after the death of their parents.

"Where was your last fashion shoot, Glyn?" Mark asked.

"New York. Why?" She looked puzzled.

"I thought maybe you'd been shopping in the wilds of Africa." He eyed her jewelry with a grin.

Amy surveyed the outrageous pieces as they walked across the sandy beach to the Marstons' patio. One pale green icicle of an earring dangled to Glynia's collarbone; her necklace was fashioned of primitive beads in the

"Thanks." She turned her attention to a sailboat gliding by in the distance. "I love it here," she said, half to herself. "The ocean . . . the sand . . . the sun . . ."

"Gets in your blood, doesn't it? When I'm home, I swim every day, even in the winter."

She remembered him, slicing through the wild waves of a winter storm years ago, but now he appeared at peace as the swells lapped at his broad shoulders. The undulating water lifted them as if they were in a watery cradle, and she noticed that his eyes seemed even bluer today. His gaze caught hers, and she quickly averted her own eyes toward the horizon.

Overhead, a vast expanse of sky stretched out to embrace the earth, the sun, the entire galaxy and whatever galaxies lay beyond. Time itself seemed suspended. For a moment, a transcendent moment, Amy felt aglow with joy. It seemed almost as if she had touched the heart of the universe, and even when the wonder passed, she sensed a peace she had never known.

"Your poetic streak is showing," Mark observed.

He must have noticed a glow about me, she thought.

She licked salt from her lips and smiled. He had always teased her about her serious side. Well, she didn't care. Nothing could disturb the perfection of this day. She swam away, exulting in her own strength as she carved a path through the pulsing waves. There was an underlying confidence, too, an almost mystical certainty that the water would not betray her. Odd as it seemed, in some ways she felt safer in the ocean than she often did among people on land.

A memory drifted back to her . . . moments from long ago. Mark must have been a teenager, because she had been about eight at the time. They had been swimming out through the breakers when a huge wave caught her, tossing her wildly while she thrashed about in helplessness and terror. Suddenly strong arms plucked her from the wave, holding her so that her head was above water while she coughed and sputtered. Mark . . . it was Mark, his face contorted with concern.

"Are you all right, Amy?" he had asked. "Are you all right?"

Gulping deep draughts of air, she could only nod in reply. It was more than simply choking on water; it was the sensation of being in his arms. She adored Mark, had even confided to Gramp that she would marry him someday, but now — now he had even saved her life!

"You're going to have to practice, if you insist on trying for long-distance swimming," he had scolded gently.

"I will, Mark . . . I promise!" The sun shimmering on the surface of the water cast him in bronze. A golden Apollo. In that wonderstruck moment she might have promised him anything. "I'm going to take more swimming lessons, maybe even diving lessons. I'll be the best swimmer you've ever seen!"

"Good girl. Let's see you give it another try right now."

ground." Amy smiled, setting her gloomy thoughts aside.

Mark added with a chuckle, "And Thom sounds just as bad when he so much as mentions her name over the phone."

"It must be wonderful to be in love," Amy ventured in an effort to keep the conversation light, then wished she had kept that particular comment to herself. He must truly think her naïve and unsophisticated!

Mark sipped from his glass of lemonade. "I wouldn't know."

Mark Marston had never been in love! She found that very difficult to believe. Yet everyone knew he had certainly not loved Erika. Poor Erika . . .

"I *do* know," he injected with rare enthusiasm, "that the best thing after a nightmare is a good swim. How about it? There's plenty of time before dinner."

"That *would* be an eye-opener." She rose and started across the patio. "I'll be back in five minutes."

He glanced at his watch and looked up with a skeptical grin. "I'm going to hold you to that."

"Five minutes!" she responded with a laugh and hurried into the house.

Upstairs in the beam-ceilinged guest room, Valerie was still asleep in her twin bed. Amy quietly stripped off her blouse and jeans and pulled on a yellow maillot, then took a few swipes at her hair with the brush.

When she returned to the patio, Mark rose from the swing, pulling off his beach jacket. "Four minutes! I can't believe it!" His mocking tone changed as he took a second look at her. "What? No bikini?"

"Not for real ocean swimming!" She turned and ran across the warm sand. If he was disappointed in her modest one-piece suit, that was his problem; she did not intend to provide entertainment for him or for any other man. As it was, she received more than her share of stares. Having been slightly overweight most of her life, she was unaccustomed to such scrutiny; it seemed an invasion of privacy. Still, she was sorely tempted to gape at Mark's magnificent physique, displayed to advantage in his brief trunks!

Resisting the impulse, Amy splashed into the cold shallow water for some distance, then dove into a wave and swam out strongly through the incoming breakers. Beyond the surf, she turned onto her back for a rest. She lay there for a long time, watching the gulls that soared overhead, their mewling cries in counterpoint with the pulsing sounds of the sea.

"I forgot you were on a swimming team!" Mark called out some distance away. "I gave you too much of a head start."

Brushing her hair from her face, Amy joined him, lazily treading water and no longer self-conscious with only their shoulders bared above the rolling swells. It seemed as if they had stepped back in time to the days when, as the oldest child, Mark had been placed in charge of the younger ones — herself, Valerie, and Thom.

"Unfortunately, I don't swim every day anymore," she confessed.

"A pity. But it's not obvious. You have a good stroke."

"Call an ambulance!" a man yelled.

Amy looked down at her parents from the stroller, not comprehending why they lay on the street nor why a crowd had gathered. Her father was smiling, seemingly in sleep. An expression of wonder filled her mother's face.

Moments later, someone murmured, "They're gone."

"What do you suppose they saw?" a woman asked into the hush.

Then someone was lifting her from her stroller and Valerie was crying. "Those poor children. To lose both —"

"No!" Amy cried as darkness drifted over her parents' motionless bodies. "No!"

Horrified, she sat up before realizing she had been dreaming — the terrible, haunting dream that had lodged itself in the depths of her mind, to be played out again and again when she was most exhausted.

Mark's voice came from the side of the patio. "You have them too, don't you?"

Brushing away perspiration from her forehead, she glimpsed him on the patio swing. In his tan swim trunks, a white terry beach jacket, and scuffed brown leather sandals, he seemed relaxed, as if he had been swinging and observing her for some time.

"Have what?" she inquired groggily.

"Nightmares. Bad dreams."

She sat up straighter, slowly coming fully awake. "You have bad dreams?"

"Occasionally." His eyes were hidden by the dark glasses again. He rose from the swing and headed for the oak table where a tray of tumblers and a pitcher had been placed near the yellow roses. He poured two glasses of lemonade. "I thought it might be of some small comfort to know you're not the only one who suffers from them."

"I — I suppose it does."

He handed her the cool drink. I thought you might be thirsty."

"Thank you. I am." She dropped her eyes to avoid seeing her own reflection in his sunglasses.

Why had Mark told her about his nightmares? She sensed that it was a rare occurrence for him to make himself so vulnerable, and she felt strangely close to him. She sipped the icy, tart drink, and recalled the old Mark as he returned to the patio swing. Five years ago he had brimmed with fun and laughter; there had been a light behind his eyes. She could easily imagine how an unstable eighteen-year-old clerk in his office might fall in love with him. Erika had —

"Apparently Valerie and Thom haven't changed their minds about getting married," Mark said, adroitly changing the subject that occupied both their minds.

"No-no, certainly not Valerie! She walks at least six inches above the

details. Still, it was amazing to see how well the woman managed everything and still had time for others. She and Valerie had been working for C's Catering since high school, earning generous wages during the frantic hours of putting together everything from wedding receptions and elegant dinner parties to political barbecues for thousands of guests. Slowly, very slowly, they had earned enough money to pay their way through college, though due to her work and Gramp's illness, Amy had been unable to study full-time and still had another year to go for her bachelor's degree.

"You've really turned down all catering jobs this month?" Amy asked.

"Absolutely. I've referred every one of them. We've even declared a moratorium on gourmet cooking to save time and energy for wedding preparations. We'll survive on family fare this next week. Now, try to nap before dinner."

"I'll try." Amy closed her eyes obediently. It was the rare individual who objected to Catherine's loving suggestions. *If ever I have a family of my own,* Amy thought, *I hope I can be just like Catherine Marston.*

In the past few years, however, her energies had been directed toward getting through Santa Rosita State College and embarking on a banking career. Unexciting as banking might be, it was a field in which women seemed likely to climb the career ladder more readily than in many others. If only she could follow her real interests — but there was no great demand for poets nor short story writers nowadays, not that there ever had been. She wished she felt more direction in her life.

As she listened to the ocean's roar, it reminded her of the fascinating conch shells she held to her ear, and then of her father. A literature professor, Dr. Curtis had underlined Dante Rossetti's "The Sea-Limits" in one of the books she often read to bring him closer to her.

Familiar lines returned to her: *Consider the sea's listless chime . . . the murmur of the earth's own shell . . .* Between dozing and waking, other lines swirled through the mist of her memory: *Gather a shell from the strewn beach and listen at its lips: they sigh the same desire and mystery, the echo of the whole sea's speech.* As the afternoon sun slanted onto the patio, she rolled over sleepily. There was another line in the poem. . . . What was it? *No quiet, which is death's . . .* The light filtering through her eyelids dimmed.

The familiar scene reappeared. She was two years old, still in her stroller that silken summer evening. Her family crossed the street, eating their after-dinner ice cream cones. Valerie skipped along just ahead, singing lustily, "The farmer in the dell, the farmer in the dell —" Quite suddenly brakes screeched and a car careened toward them.

"Run!" her father shouted.

She felt the stroller propelled in the direction of the curb, heard her mother's labored breathing just before the shocking sound of metal on flesh. Then the sound of gears meshing in reverse, and a car raced away from the scene.

wore her old clothes. And Mark, after depositing her at his home, had departed for the airport to pick up a friend . . . evidently a female friend since his mother had called after him, "Be sure to invite her for dinner, though it's just going to be spaghetti out on the patio!"

Who *she* might be was a matter of speculation. Amy hoped it wasn't Glynia, the exotic model who sometimes visited her mother and stepfather next door. Long before Glynia had become a model, she and Mark had been childhood friends, though she'd been known then to their fellow classmates as that "kooky Gloria Anne Bennington."

Mark's mother, Catherine Marston, tiptoed across the Mexican tile patio, carrying a vase full of yellow roses to the round redwood table. She cast a concerned glance at Amy, then sighed. "Oh, I had hoped to find you sleeping. You've looked so tired lately."

Amy sat up with a twinge of guilt. "I'm fine . . . truly. Please let me help with dinner."

With a firm shake of her head, the older woman placed the roses on the dinner table. "Thanks, but everything's under control." The liveliness in her brown eyes and her slim figure in the moss green shift belied her age, only streaks of gray in her auburn hair and smile lines curving around her mouth hinted that she was past fifty. She crossed the patio and lifted Amy's feet back onto the chaise longue. "At least put your feet up."

Amy lay back, reluctantly enjoying the rare experience of being pampered. "Thank you. I think I've forgotten how to relax."

"Then I'm going to see to it that you remember!" Catherine warned with a laugh.

Amy felt a familiar rush of love for the woman. She recalled a long-ago picture of her mother and Catherine going off to grade school with their arms around each other; they had been best friends all of their lives — until her mother's death. Afterward, Catherine had tried to fill that tragic gap in the two young lives, indulging what she called her need of feminine support. "I'd never survive without you girls," she had often insisted. "I'm the only woman in this houseful of men!" It was indeed a male household — her husband, Mark, and Thom.

Now Catherine said, "The ocean will do wonders for you, Amy, dear. Blows the cobwebs away. It always has for me."

"I've wondered what your secret is. How you could run your catering business, this enormous house, community activities . . . and a thousand and one other things!"

"The ocean helps, but I pray a lot too!" Catherine responded with a wry expression.

Amy forced a smile, uncomfortable as usual at the mention of Catherine's faith. Amy knew her comment was meant to be taken literally. Catherine Marston did pray a lot and aloud, especially when they were catering a big job; it appeared as if she expected God to be interested in even the minutest

"You've been — almost an older brother." Well, until five years ago, he had been. After that, the camaraderie had ceased; he had grown silent during their visits to the Marston home on those rare occasions when he was around, although she felt certain that his aloofness was not caused by anything she or Valerie had done.

Braking for a traffic light, Mark studied her thoughtfully, and she had to look away at the restaurants and shops along the Coast Highway before she could continue. "Your entire family has been wonderful to Valerie and me all of these years since my parents died. And they helped so much with Gramp. I don't know how we could have managed without . . . all of you."

The light changed to green, and nothing more was said about her feelings. Instead, an air of tenuousness hung between them as they drove through Santa Rosita's downtown traffic. After knowing each other for so many years, they were acting like strangers.

Finally Mark broke the silence. "I'm glad the wedding's been moved to Virginia."

"I am too. After Gramp died, it seemed senseless to have it in Santa Rosita, especially since our only relatives live on the East Coast. Most of yours too. And with Thom receiving his doctorate from Princeton just days before the wedding, then going to work in Washington almost immediately, it was the logical thing to do."

To make the new plan even more practical, Thom's aunt — and, of course, Mark's too — had graciously offered to hold the wedding in her historic home in Alexandria, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, D.C., the same house in which their parents had been married. If Aunt Alicia had the same flair for creating occasions as their mother, Catherine, the festivities would be not only memorable but marvelous. The drawback to the new plan was that the expense of the trip would cut severely into Amy's small savings account. And, of course, the cross-country flight would make the distance between her and her sister seem even more pronounced. Soon she would be alone — truly alone. . . .

The smell of salt air wafted in on the warm afternoon breeze, and the surging Pacific Ocean shimmered a silvery blue, reflecting scattered clouds that momentarily veiled the sun. It would be a beautiful sunset, Amy thought as she reclined on a chaise longue on the patio of the Marstons' two-story white Spanish ocean-front home.

Beyond the low stucco wall with its old brass lanterns was a sandy beach, then the vastness of ocean. Great waves gathered in the distance and crashed to shore. If she could only listen to the music of the sea long enough, its rhythms might soothe the growing emptiness within her.

Valerie, ever the serene one in the family, was sleeping in their room upstairs. Not wanting to awaken her by opening the closet and drawers to which they had transferred their clothing in the past two days, Amy still

"I warned you about backward glances." Mark's tone brooked no argument as he started the van. Worse, his dark glasses masked not only his blue eyes, but the expression in them, making him appear callous, uncaring.

She donned her own sunglasses. "Don't you ever look back?" Amy kept her voice even as they drove away.

"No," he said bluntly. "I don't."

She almost blurted, *Then why have you changed so?* but held her tongue. His entire life seemed colored by what had happened to that girl. She decided not to pursue the thought.

He looked directly ahead, preoccupied with his task of maneuvering the van through the late afternoon traffic, and she took the opportunity to study his profile, noticing how his fashionably cut hair angled slightly onto his high forehead. His nose was straight, patrician. Her eyes wandered to his high cheekbones, to his angular chin, then to his narrow sensuous lips. There was a confidence about him that appealed to Amy as he wheeled the van through the maze of cars and trucks around them.

Apparently unaware of her scrutiny, he said, "The owners of the condo I've been leasing are returning from Europe early, so I'm moving back home until after the wedding."

"I didn't know you'd be there," she said almost too quickly, as if to clarify the fact that she was not moving in because of him. In fact, if she had known, she might have had second thoughts about accepting his parents' invitation — not that the house wasn't large enough to accommodate all of them quite easily.

"I just found out this week."

What was *that* supposed to mean? That he hadn't had time to make other arrangements? That he hadn't moved home so she could pursue her childhood infatuation? Was he careful now to keep women at a distance, or was she reading too much into the situation?

She realized she was sitting bolt upright and forced herself to relax against the van's warm black vinyl seat. After a while she cast about for a safe topic of conversation. "Will you commute to L.A. every day?" His national travel agency, which specialized in tours for foreigners visiting the United States, was headquartered in West Los Angeles.

"No, I'll be out of town a lot. As a matter of fact, I'm flying up to San Francisco next Monday."

She felt strangely relieved. "Sounds like fun!"

He chuckled. "You don't have to look quite so pleased that I'm leaving."

"Pleased?" she hedged. "Why should I be pleased?"

"Somehow I've gotten the impression you don't like me very much."

"Don't like you? Of all the peculiar ideas!" It was true that she didn't quite know how she felt about him now, but most of her life she had idolized him. "Why should I dislike you?"

"I'm sure there must be a dozen good reasons."

but now it's so final. It's so terribly clear he's no longer here." Glancing at Mark to see if he understood, she found him frowning, his eyes glacial.

"If the house is all locked up, let's go."

"But —"

"A fast getaway doesn't hurt nearly so much."

It does hurt! It hurts dreadfully! Amy objected silently, but she knew from his tone of voice that there was no point in arguing with him, no point at all.

Once outside, Amy was suddenly aware of the spectacle she must be making for passers-by as she rushed out the door, mop and broom in hand. What an inglorious exit, after all of Valerie's attempts to mold her into a lady!

From next door, Mrs. Brockaw waved. "See you at the wedding!"

"Yes! Good-by, Mrs. Brockaw!" They had spoken at length this morning, and there was nothing to do now but to return the older woman's wave. The Brockaws would be driving across the country in their camper to attend the wedding, accompanied by their son Rob, whom Amy had begun to date in the past month. In fact, Rob would be here now, helping her with the move, if he hadn't been called out of town on business.

"What do we do with the house keys?" Mark asked.

"We have to drop them off at Santa Rosita Realty, then take the boxes and cleaning supplies to the mini-warehouse. I hope you don't mind."

"No problem," he replied. He strode across the small crabgrass lawn toward the driveway, as if to quickly deliver her from the source of her grief, but Amy was unable to resist turning back for one last look.

The house was just a small California stucco on a narrow city lot, but they had been happy here — she and Valerie and Gramp. She noted that the hibiscus bushes near the front steps were covered with red blossoms, and bursts of purple bougainvillaea bloomed against the white chimney wall.

"No backward glances," Mark warned as he helped her into the familiar red van advertising "C's Catering" — his mother's business. "They don't do any good."

He probably was unable to cope with weepy females after the torment he'd been through. He was no doubt castigating himself even now for allowing himself to be drawn into Amy's situation. But that was *his* problem, she thought resolutely. She hadn't asked for his help!

While Mark made his way around to the driver's seat, Amy darted one final look through the van's open window. The afternoon ocean breeze was rising, rustling fronds on the palm trees that lined the streets and towered over the old houses. She knew that she would always remember this scene and this moment when her future was so uncertain. As the breeze gathered strength, the palms she had always envisioned as sentinels seemed to be waving farewell.

She dug in her handbag for a tissue to dab away the dampness clinging to her lashes.

vaguely sensuous light passing from his eyes to hers as if considering whether or not she might be fair game, or if there were another man in the picture. What a ridiculous notion!

She rushed on distractedly. "Moving in with your family for a few weeks seemed our only option. The new owners of this house have to be in tomorrow, and my apartment by the university isn't quite finished." It struck her that he might think she was imposing, taking advantage of his parents' generous hospitality.

He paused only an instant. "It does seem to be the most sensible thing to do. After all, in a little over two weeks, you'll be part of the family." Turning, he headed for the front door with the carton perched on a broad shoulder.

But I won't actually be part of the Marston family, she fretted as she hurried to the kitchen. Valerie was the one who would become Mark's sister-in-law and the daughter-in-law of his parents. If it weren't for her love for Val, she might resent the rapidly approaching wedding, maybe even feel hurt that Valerie would be leaving Southern California to move to Virginia — in a sense, abandoning her. She knew well that feeling of loss. Twenty years ago their parents had been killed in an accident, and Gram and Gramp had taken in the two little girls, then five and two, and reared them as their own. Gram had died a few years later. Now Gramp had, as he called it, "gone on to Glory" too.

Shaking off her unhappiness, Amy focused on her immediate duties but found her thoughts drifting again to the touch of Mark's gaze upon her only moments ago. In all the years she had known him, he had never looked at her like that. . . .

"Everything all right?" he inquired as he returned for the other carton and the vacuum cleaner.

Startled, she realized that she had been staring at a kitchen cabinet. "Oh! Yes, of course. I — I'm afraid I've been daydreaming." She set off determinedly for the back door. "I'll just lock the doors and windows and be right with you."

Minutes later, when everything was locked up and she had gathered the last of the cleaning supplies, Amy cast a lingering look at the familiar rooms of the only house she remembered. Her throat tightened. Through Gramp's illness, his funeral, and the selling of the house, she had refused to cry. Keeping a stiff upper lip had seemed imperative. *Don't break down now!* she warned herself — *especially not in front of Mark!* But she could no longer restrain the hot tears that sprang to her eyes.

"Here, use this." Mark offered his neatly folded handkerchief, but his voice sounded stiff and stern. "Crying doesn't solve anything, you know. It might be an old cliché, but it's true."

She swallowed with difficulty, blotting away the tears. "It's just — the memories. Even after Gramp died, it seemed he was still in the next room,

fashionable hollows. Despite her own impressive height, she noted again how Mark towered over her. He looked striking as usual, wearing a blue polo shirt that enhanced the startling sapphire hue of his eyes and displayed the breadth of his shoulders. "It's been months since I've seen you," she finally said into the lengthening silence.

He raised a brow in reflection. "Must have been Christmas."

"Yes . . . when the wedding was announced at your parents' house." She recalled that their uneasy conversation had centered upon their future roles as maid-of-honor and best man in Valerie's wedding to his younger brother Thom — and not much else.

"We thought the bride-to-be needed a rest, so Mom talked her into going to bed," Mark said, explaining his presence at her doorstep. "We don't want Val backing out at the last minute from sheer exhaustion."

Amy laughed. "Little chance of that, but she *has* been overdoing it." She moved aside a bit too quickly to let him into the house, embarrassed to have kept him standing outside and wishing that she didn't always react so awkwardly around Mark. He was terribly attractive and eight years older — thirty to her twenty-two. But then, she had never known quite how to act around men. They had always gravitated toward her svelte sister. Now, since the tragedy Mark had experienced and the ensuing changes in him, she felt especially gauche. "I thought you were still in Los Angeles."

He smiled, his even teeth white against his tan. "Oh, American Holidays, Inc. won't fold up just because the president decides to take an occasional long weekend. And it isn't every day that the Marstons welcome two such lovely ladies as houseguests. The family is gathering just for that purpose."

"How nice . . ." Amy was uncertain as to whether Mark was pleased or not; he had probably come home — and here — at his mother's request. Despite some semblance of the old charm in his initial greeting, he had changed so much since the tragedy five years ago that it was difficult to read the real meaning behind his words.

For example, she wondered what he was thinking now. He continued to gaze at her with perplexity before a flicker of realization lit his face. "I hadn't decided until now what was so different about you. You've lost a lot of weight, haven't you?"

She shrugged. "I couldn't eat when Gramp was sick."

"That explains it. . . . I'm sorry to have missed the funeral."

"Your parents helped enormously, and I know you were in New York —"

"Yes . . . well —" His tone changed. "Let me give you a hand with packing what's left."

"It's just these cartons, the vacuum cleaner, the mop, and a broom in the kitchen. Not very thrilling, is it?" Heat crept up to her cheeks. Since when did boxes of household articles have to be thrilling? Since Mark had come to pick her up and had noticed that she was no longer *chubby* Amy Curtis?

Effortlessly shouldering one of the boxes, he appraised her again, a

1

Amy Curtis felt a shiver of excitement as a sudden flash of light swept the walls of the already sunlit living room. It was only the reflection from a car pulling into the driveway, she told herself as she finished vacuuming the carpet, yet her sense of anticipation lingered.

She turned off the vacuum cleaner and quickly wound up its cord, grateful that the empty house gleamed, that the new owners would find everything spotless. It seemed strange to be leaving this house in which she had spent most of her twenty-two years. She had always imagined herself, like her older sister Valerie, leaving home to walk into the arms of love, to marry someone special; instead, she would be venturing into the unknown — alone.

Outside, a car door slammed. That would be Valerie now, coming to collect her with this last load of moving cartons. Gramp's old two-bedroom stucco house had sold at last, and the weeks of packing and moving were drawing to an end.

A knock at the front door startled her. Who would be knocking? Surely not Val . . .

Amy hurried to the screen door, flipping her long dark hair over her shoulders. Recognizing the man standing there, she felt her mouth fall open slightly as if she were — as her grandfather would have teased — catching flies.

"My, my, you look surprised," Mark Marston said with a hint of amusement playing around his narrow lips. He slid his sunglasses up into slightly wavy dark brown hair that gleamed with reddish highlights in the California sunshine.

It was a moment before she thought to open the screen door. "I — I was expecting Valerie."

"I've come instead," he responded in his confident, rich baritone. "I hope you don't mind."

"No — of course not —" She was all too aware of her grubby, cleaning clothes: old cut-off jeans and a faded turquoise shirt that had once matched her eyes. At least she was slim now, she thought gratefully. With the weight loss she had even acquired rather elegant cheekbones, accentuated by

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